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# Ritualistic self-display: The interruptions in a Chinese academic talk

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**Abstract:** This paper engages in a politeness-based investigation of cases when forms of interruption operate as ritualistic self-display. By “ritualistic self-display” we refer to instances of language use in which an interruption is a form of “showing off,” by means of which the interrupting person indicates their skill, power, social status, and so on. We point out that such instances of language use may not merely trigger complex evaluations. Even in hierarchical settings in which ritualistic self-display could be easily condoned, paradoxically it may be utilized by the interrupted person as an interactional resource to boost her or his self-image, i.e., ritualistic self-display is a leeway for a counter-display. As a case study, we examine an incident that took place in a Chinese institutional setting. Chinese data has particular relevance to the study of ritualistic self-display, considering that Chinese is often perceived as a lingua-culture in which interruption is not tolerated due to prevailing social hierarchies.

**Keywords:** interruption; ritualistic behaviour; self-display; politeness research, scholarly communication

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore how interruption operates as a form of ritualistic self-display.<sup>1</sup> Interruption is a complex concept in that there might be dissonance between observable structural disruptions in discourse and participants’ understanding of the interaction (Bennett 1978). Conversation analysts hold that it is moral aspect in the common sense account of interruption that matters to participants (Hutchby 1992:368), that it involves giving considerations not just to how the interrupter does interrupting but also how the interrupted does being interrupted (Hutchby 2008:227). Evaluations are of natural and major concerns in this process of interaction. We intend to examine this phenomenon from the point of view of

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1 Although inspired by Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), the paper adopts the term “self-display” in a more general sense.

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linguistic (im)politeness research within the theoretical framework of ritual interaction (cf. Kádár 2017). The connection between the interruptions under study and (im)politeness in general takes various forms of identity-face issues in interactions (Spencer-Oatey 2007; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013). We adopt the term ‘ritualistic self-display’ to refer to instances of language use in which interruption is used as a form of ‘showing off’, to indicate the interrupting person’s skill, power, status, and so on. We intentionally use the expression ‘ritualistic’ instead of ‘ritual’: while the instances of language behavior that we are exploring here have many similar characteristics with medieval ritual ceremonies of self-display such as ritual duels (see an overview in Bax 1999), they are not conventionalised practices and as such lack the pragmatic fixedness of proper rituals. Such forms of interruption are interconnected with ritual (see an overview in Kádár 2017a) by the following characteristics:

- they usually occur in interactions that have a complex participatory framework (Goffman 1981),
- they represent communally-oriented interactional behaviour in that they index willingness to align with others;
- and, most importantly for us here, just like rituals, they trigger participation in the form of counter self-display (cf. Collins 2004).

In a similar way to any ritual, rights and obligations play a central role in the operation of interruption as ritualistic self-display (see Kádár 2013; Kádár and House 2019). The person who ritualistically interrupts someone else may be perceived to have trespassed their and the other person’s contextually situated rights, and as such their behaviours may be highly controversial – in a similar way to any form of interruption (see Murata 1994). At the same time, the *raison d’être* of such interruptions is that the interrupting person somehow feels entitled or empowered to let their voice heard, and somewhat paradoxically ritualistic self-display may be tolerated because it creates an opportunity for the interrupted person to engage in a counter self-display. Such counter-action may not even need to be hostile: i.e. the person who is interrupted may showcase his competence by handling the interruption with a relationally constructive form of professional humour. Thus, ritualistic self-display has the potential to create a ritual frame (see Kádár and House forthcoming) in which the participants can (even mutually) enhance their faces (i.e. public self-image, Goffman 1955).

By approaching interruption as a ritualistic phenomenon, we aim to contribute to previous research on interruption from an alternative angle. In a body of research, interruption has been divided into the types of interactionally ‘supportive’ and ‘non-supportive’ (e.g., Ali Al-Roubaie 2008; Cusen 2017; Murata 1994). Its occurrence can be interpreted as a willingness of the interrupter to participate in an ongoing conversation as a means for social interaction, or it may be considered as rude, aggressive or disrespectful to the speaker in terms of trespassing individual security. Associated with their institutional roles, speakers may formulate their own talk as interruptive as a means to accomplish the rights and responsibilities (Schegloff 2006), which includes launching new or managing existing courses of action. Thus, interruption may only benefit a single party in an interaction (i.e., the interruptor); as has been argued, speakers may formulate their own talks as interruptive as a means to “exert their deontic authority to determine the trajectory of an institutional interaction” (Weatherall and Edmonds 2018: 22). An exception to these is the above-discussed case of relationally constructive ‘supportive’ interruption which may reflect the interrupting person’s solidarity and involvement with the speaker, and as such it may be beneficial to both the interrupter and the interrupted person (Tannen 1986/1992: 157).

Interruption as ritualistic self-display is a noteworthy case as it does not fit perfectly into the dichotomy of ‘supportive vs. non-supportive’. It also takes a sense of self-oriented form of behaviour (Chen 2001). While such a kind of interruption may not always be relationally

supportive, its ritualistic nature creates an opportunity for the interrupted person to enhance his or her professional face by tactfully framing the uptake of the interruptions into that of interactions (see details in section 4). An additional reason why interruption as ritualistic self-display is relevant to previous research is that to date little to no research has been done on the role of interruption situated in interactions with complex participation framework (Goffman 1981), in which interruption is not *ad hoc* in the sense that it represents recurrent moves (or ‘strategies’). By taking into consideration the participation order (Haugh 2013; Kádár and Haugh 2013), the present paper demonstrates that if interruption becomes a form of ritualistic self-display among a group of ratified participants, it can be understood and evaluated in significantly different ways by different participants at different “evaluative moments” (Eelen 2001: 35) of an interaction.

Along with contributing to research on interruption, the present study also hopes to contribute to previous research on interactional rituals. Erving Goffman’s (1967) seminal work on urban rituals has influenced both bottom-up pragmalinguistics (e.g., Coulmas 1979; Edmondson 1981) and sociopragmatics (e.g., Kádár 2012, 2013, 2017a; Kádár and Bax 2013, Kádár and Ran 2015; Horgan 2019) research on ritual. Unlike Durkheim’s ritual (1995/1912) theory which is anchored in religious studies and regards ritual as a sacred phenomenon that only takes place in specific times and spaces, Goffman (1967: 19, emphasis added), views ritual as the *face-sustaining* expressive order, i.e., as an interactionally-created order, which helps the interactants to maintain their own and others’ public self-image in everyday and mundane interpersonal encounters. Goffman argues that enhancing the public self-image – i.e., the faces of both speaker and hearer – is the “main principle of ritual order” (Goffman 1967: 44), and so in any human interaction people organise their daily interactional activities vis-à-vis “interpersonal rituals” including salutations, compliments and apologies (Goffman 1967: 57), as well as presentation rituals and avoidance rituals that specify what is to be done and what is not (Goffman 1967: 71). Pragmatics and social interactional research on ritual theory has mainly focused on conventionalised ritual practices, in which rights and obligations and the subsequent order of the interaction relatively lack ambiguity. The ritualistic self-display under study contributes to previous research by exploring the ambiguous nature of this phenomenon. We intend to argue that ritualistic behaviour – just like its ritual counterpart – can help the interactants maintain their own and others’ faces, or public self-image in Goffman’s sense.

### Interruptions under study

In the present inquiry, we approach interruption by examining a talk delivered by an invited guest speaker to a hall of graduate students at a Chinese university. This data is noteworthy because it features interruption in a talk which was monologic but which was delivered in an interactive fashion. That is, since it was the first time for the speaker to deliver the talk in front of the audience, the speaker wanted to encourage some form of supportive (albeit arguably not interruptive) audience involvement in the course of his lecture. This intention was evidenced by a number of rhetorical strategies the speaker deployed: for instance, he addressed the audience frequently in a direct fashion, peppered his talk with rhetorical questions, and inserted pauses in his talk and requested feedback from time to time. This dialogical story-telling and interactive style was well-received by the audience: many members of the audience broke out in laughter more than 50 times during the approximately 134-minute talk.<sup>2</sup> Thus in a sense, the seeds of interruption as ritualistic self-display were planted in the interactional context, despite

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<sup>2</sup> The present analysis does not focus on the intensity of laughter, even though we made a distinction between chuckle (heh-heh) and laughter (haha).

the fact that the talk delivered by a high-profile academic could have discouraged many to engage in a self-propelled action outside of the interactional boundaries that the speaker's rhetorical strategies encouraged. As laughter can be a resource for the participants to manage their divergence of evaluative positions (Raclaw and Ford 2017) and a source of reference for evaluations of interruption (Haugh 2010), we will deploy audience laughter as a reference point in the present analysis. Note that in this context – in which the speaker encouraged audience participation – an audience member's single utterance made at the wrong time would have not been unanimously interpreted as interruptive. Rather, perception of interruption emerged when an audience member *continuously trespassed* his or her ratified role and related rights and obligations.

The Chinese context (cf. Pan and Kádár 2011a; 2011b) makes the study of ritualistic interruption particularly relevant. In the academic event studied, the speaker was interrupted by someone who was 'below' him both in terms of physical distance (in the sense that the interrupting student was sitting down in the middle of the hall while the speaker was standing up on the stage) and academic power. Both the physical setting (the talk took place in a lecture hall that can sit more than 200 persons) and the authority of the speaker (who is a renowned academic) could have rendered interruption highly inappropriate (see also Section 4). This is particularly the case due to the importance attributed to institutional authority in Chinese culture (cf. Kádár 2017b). While the speaker holds less institutionalized power over the students given the absence of responsibility for assigning the grades, it is still safe in claiming that he is more powerful in terms of greater knowledge, academic status and age. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of strategies for performing face-threatening acts and the factors influencing the choice of the strategies would predict that the students would utilize more polite forms with more redress of disagreement. The case under study does not apply: in the present data the interrupting student did not use hedges, nor markers of hesitation, nor mitigation devices. Still in the actual interaction the interruptions seemed rather welcome – at least to a certain point – as shown by both the speaker's reaction and supportive laughter from the audience (see Section 4).

The case studied demonstrates the importance of bottom-up explorations of communicative behaviour in Chinese context, which tend to be described in stereotypical terms such as 'hierarchical'. While of course a university lecture is far less a hierarchical setting than e.g., a company, in Chinese culture there is a traditional sense of respect associated with the role of lecturer, and as such the context studied illustrates that stereotypical views on a lingua-culture have limited use when it comes to complex interactional phenomena such as ritualistic self-display. Approached from this perspective, our inquiry is broken down into the following research questions:

- 1) What collaboratively triggered the ritualistic self-display in the talk?
- 2) What are the discourse features that mark the interruption as different from the interaction?
- 3) In what sense would the interrupter's behavior enhance or damage the speaker's face?

These questions will be addressed in our analysis of the data (see Section 4).

## Data

Conversation analytic research has proposed that there are no objective criteria for what counts as an interruption. Interruption can take place without any actual overlapping and can instead show solidarity by sustaining the conversational topic. Our CA-informed analysis is based on

the partial transcription of a 134-minute audiorecording of the lecture. As our focus is on interruption in particular, the transcript consists of approximately 6,500 characters covering mainly the interactions between the speaker and the interrupting student as well as the audience as a whole. It includes both linguistic and paralinguistic features, i.e., laughter and murmuring among the audience. To highlight the focus of the analysis, the data transcription adopts a simple pattern (cf. Rees-Miller 2000:1092) that operates with the following symbols:

(...) omitted words  
 [xxx] editorial gloss or other information  
 ... pause (with indeterminate length but easily perceptibly long)  
 \*\* extended sound  
 / interrupted place  
 } overlap

For ethical reasons, real names were replaced by simple codes in our transcript: “S” for the speaker, “T” for the interrupting student, “H” for the host and “X” for other audience members.

## Analysis

Since the beginning of the interaction, the speaker and the interrupting student have engaged in a series of relationally constructive ritualistic interruptions. The following excerpt illustrates how this ritualistic exchange started:

(1) 3 minutes 12 second into the talk

S = speaker  
 T = interrupting student  
 H = host of the event  
 X = other members of the audience

01 S: (...) 呵呵应该听过的, 是吧, [人名<sub>1</sub>] 这个名字应该是如雷贯耳, 是吧?  
 → 实际上今天下午其实我本来是说要给大家介绍一下, 如果大家对这个  
 人还不是太了解的话, 给大家介绍一下[人名<sub>1</sub>]这个生平情况, 当然了/

02 T: 介绍一下, 介绍一下, 我不懂。

03 X: 呵呵

04 → S: 介绍一下是吧

05 T: 嗯

06 S: 好的。额, 大家知道我在介绍哲学家的生平传记呢, 也是围绕他的哲学思想, 而不是纯粹单纯地谈他的个人事迹(...)

01 S: (...) hah-hah [You] must have heard about him, right? The fame of [name<sub>1</sub>] must reverberate like thunder, right? As a matter of fact, for the talk in the afternoon  
 → I planned to make an introduction to you, if you do not know much of this person, to make an introduction to you about [name<sub>1</sub>]'s life. **Surely/**

02 T: Go on, go on, I don't know

03 X: heh-heh

04 → S: with an introduction right?

05 T: hmmm.

- 06 S: [smiling] Alright. Well, you know when I introduce the life of a philosopher, I would thread the story around his philosophical ideology, rather than a simple account of his anecdotes (...)

In this extract, the interrupting student (T) began to talk as the speaker uttered “Surely” (Line 1 in boldface), which is not a turn-constructional unit (TCU, Sacks et al. 1974). The interrupting student’s utterance might have been perceived as interruption by many because the rest of the audience was quietly expecting S at this stage to expand on the argument that “surely” initiated. Previous research (cf. Rees-Miller 2000) has pointed out that in institutional scenarios like the one studied here, the powerful party would expect “Excuse me” or an address term like “Professor” (in classroom settings) to mitigate the interruption, in particular in the Chinese context. However, the interruption did not seem to be evaluated negatively by the speaker. This might be because the interrupting student made the interruption in a ‘vivid’ fashion, i.e. her eagerness for knowledge might enhance the speaker’s face, and also it might indicate alignment with S’s strategy to engage his audience (the underlined parts in Lines 1 & 4). Note that there are various reasons – apart from institutional power difference and the sociocultural context – why the interruption could have been evaluated negatively in the present context:

- a) The interrupting student is a total stranger to the speaker. The lack of relational history (cf. Locher and Watts 2005) could render the utterance “go on, go on” (Line 2) inappropriate<sup>3</sup> in spite of the apparent intention of the interrupter to align herself with the speaker because it trespassed situated rights and obligations.
- b) The interrupting student’s weak form of response (the less enthusiastic sound “hmm (Line 5)” instead of a more powerful “yes”) and the lack of gratitude token that many would expect (e.g., “thank you”) could also trigger negative evaluations.
- c) The audience reaction – in particular, the chuckling at the particular moment of interruption (“heh-heh” [Line 3] ) – indicates that the interrupting student’s behaviour was evaluated as unconventional (e.g., Ruhi 2007; Terkourafi 2008).

Yet, no visible negative evaluation occurred: the speaker appeared to be undisturbed, which was also evidenced by the fact that he responded cheerfully with a smiling facial expression, and that he immediately accepted the request the interrupting student had made (Line 6). In so doing he interactionally positioned the interrupting student as a legitimate communicator, and himself as an approachable and amiable speaker. This initial interactional exchange set the frame for the interrupting student’s frequent ritualistic self-display afterwards and triggered the ritualistic interactional chain exchanges between the interrupting student and the speaker (Collins 2004).

Importantly, as the interaction unfolded it became evident that while all forms of interruption as ritualistic self-displaying were interconnected and influenced each other in the process, they might fulfill different contextually situated functions. If we note down all the interruptions (35) embedded in the talk between the speaker and the interrupting student along the time line, we would get the following diagram:

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<sup>3</sup> Following Culpeper’s (2012) corpus studies on the strong link between inappropriateness and impoliteness, we use these two terms as synonyms in the paper.

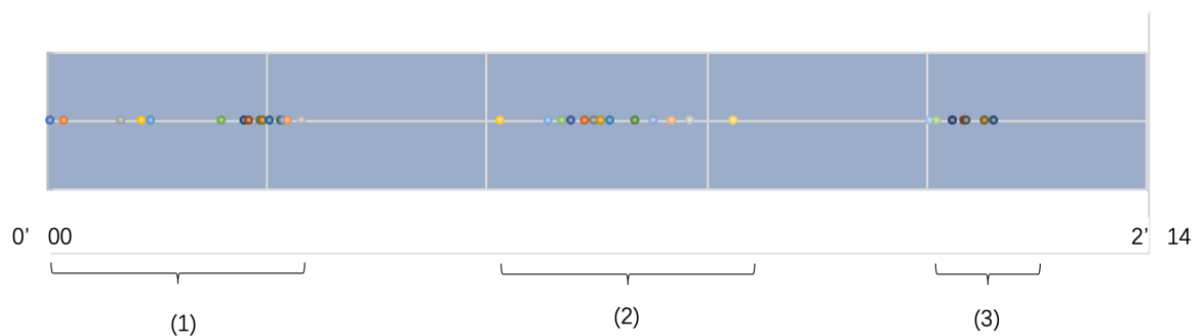


Figure 1: The time nodes of the interruptions from the interrupting student in the talk

As the diagram presents, after the initial ritualistic interaction, the student started more engagement in the talk that roughly clustered at different periods. The pattern of the time nodes mirrors the life-cycle of ritualistic self-display in the interaction: from cooperative interruption (1) through intrusive interruption (2) to finally being used as face-enhancing resources by both parties (3). The following analysis focuses on these functions to overview the whole spectrum of how ritualistic self-display operates in our case study.

#### *Cooperative interruption: Affiliative self-display*

(2) 15 minutes 17 seconds into the talk

- 01 S: 他没有自己家庭，也没有自己的孩子，所以他最大的乐趣，就是哲学思考，我说这样的哲学家他不成为伟大的哲学家才怪呢/
- 02 X: 呵呵 (...)
- 03 S: [1分钟的家庭介绍]他出生在一个巨富的家庭，富到什么程度？富可敌国的家庭 /
- 04 X: 哇
- 05 → T: 那他真的只要做一件事就好了
- 06 X: 呵呵
- 07 S: 对/
- 08 X: 呵呵
- 09 → S: [指着屏幕上的照片]小的、矮的是他 (...)
- 
- 01 S: He didn't start a family of his own, nor did he have any child. So, his biggest pleasure was to do philosophical speculations. It would surprise me if such a philosopher wouldn't turn out to be a great one /
- 02 X: heh-heh (...)
- 03 S: [one-minute introduction of the family background]. He was born into an extremely rich family. How rich could it be? His family had more money than a whole nation /
- 04 X: wow
- 05 → T: Well then in that case all he needed to do was but thinking.
- 06 X: heh-heh
- 07 S: Correct/
- 08 X: heh-heh
- 09 → S: [Pointing to the photo on the screen] The smaller, shorter one, was him (...)

Despite the apparently fully-fledged closure at the end of the speaker's first turn, the interrupting student's cut-in (Line 5) might have been unexpected since the speaker immediately resumed his talk by directing the audience's attention back to the screen (Line 9). The interruption was evaluated as *cooperative*, in that the interrupting student rehearsed the speaker's claim through a form of agreement. While agreement tends to be preferred in a public talk (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987:112ff; Sacks 1973/1987: 54ff), the interruption disrupted the order of the interaction. Unlike other audience members who marveled at the speaker's analogy of the philosopher's wealthy background, which was normally expected in this setting (in particular in the Chinese context), the interrupting student made a loud and clear evaluation. This evaluative move accentuated her self-claimed identity as a 'figurehead' of the audience, i.e. it is clearly a form of ritualistic self-display. Arguably, through this direct alignment with the speaker, the interrupting student enhanced her own face by ritually showing off her competence against the audience.

Such cases of affiliative self-display count as fairly standard in the data, as the following extract illustrates:

(3) 39 minutes into the talk

- 01 S: 在[人名<sub>1</sub>]看来很糟糕的导言当中, [人名<sub>2</sub>]却极力推崇这本著作的哲学价值, 他是这么说的, 他说, 虽然我不能够肯定这本书说了什么/  
 02 X: 呵呵  
 03 S: 但是我可以毫无保留的向大家推荐这本书/  
 04 X: 呵呵\*\*  
 05 T: 说明他没看懂。  
 06 S: You are right 他没看懂/  
 07 X: 呵呵  
 08 S: 他没看懂或许在他看来正因为没看懂, 才显得更重要。  
 09 X: 哈哈\*\*
- 01 S: In the preface that [name<sub>1</sub>] himself deemed terrible, [name<sub>2</sub>] made a very strong recommendation of the philosophical value of the book. He said something like this. He said, 'although I am not very sure of what it says' /  
 02 X: heh-heh  
 03 S: 'I can recommend it to you all, wholeheartedly' /  
 04 X: heh-heh\*\*  
 05 T: So he couldn't follow the book.  
 06 → S: You are right [sic]. He couldn't follow the book /  
 07 X: heh-heh  
 08 → S: He couldn't follow, and most probably it is just because he couldn't follow that he saw the significance of this book.  
 09 X: haha\*\*

Similar to Extract (2), this interruption was interpreted as cooperative: the speaker picked up what the interrupting student said and used it as a summation of the prior talk (both Lines 6 & 8). As previous literature (Clayman 2002) points out, the unmitigated delivery of opinion could be a solidary act, so the speaker made a positive response. It is relevant to note here that the speaker switched the code of the interaction by saying "You are right" in English (the underlined part in Line 6). Research on code switching indicates that this move may be



disaffiliative in the sense of setting boundaries (Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou 2003: 11). This could be a possible reading for the expression *per se* and indicate the speaker's discomfort with the situation of being interrupted. Yet, this potential implication was counterbalanced by the word-by-word repetition the speaker was giving to confirm the response, and it is possible that – instead of indicating disaffiliation – codeswitching here actually helped the speaker to intensify the positive tone of his feedback to the interrupting student. The English version thematised “you”, and as such credited the interrupting student as a legitimate receiver of the compliment and as such enhanced the interrupting student's face. Uttering “Correct” or its Chinese counterpart “*duì* (对)” would have been a weaker form to express the same meaning in the given context. Note that the audience – which already delivered an endorsement laughter in reaction to the speaker's anecdote during the talk – laughed out in a more intense way (the underlined part, from (“*heh-heh\*\**” [Lines 2, 4 & 7] to “*haha\*\**” [Line 9]) as the speaker responded positively to the interrupting student. This indicated that various members of the audience evaluated the interruption-response chains within the frame of ritualistic self-display as a form of behaviour that provided an opportunity for the speaker to enhance his own face.

The endorsement of the speaker prompted the interrupting student to engage in ritualistic interruption in a more aggressive way, as the following section illustrates.

*Intrusive interruption: Disaffiliative self-display*

(4) 21 minutes 15 seconds into the talk

[The speaker described the philosopher's wealthy family background]

01 S: (···)专门请到了教希腊语的来自希腊的老师，专门请到了教风英语的来自英国的老师，专门请到了教法语的. 来自法国的老师 …

02 X: 哇\*\*

03 → T: 现在孩子也都这样了。

04 → S: [语气急促] 现在孩子也做不到，现在孩子也，他想这样，他即使有这个条件他也不会这么做(···)

01 S: (...They) have hired specifically the Greek teacher from Greece, the English teacher from the UK, and the French teacher from France ...

02 X: Wow\*\*

03 → T: Nowadays children can also enjoy such treatment.

04 → S: [said in an urgent tone] Nowadays children cannot enjoy such treatment. Nowadays children, even they had such privileges, would not choose to do so (...)

This interruption took place after a series of relationally constructive affiliative interruptions. On this occasion, the interrupting student seemed to have trespassed her rights: her apparently naïve yet provocative remark (Line 3) triggered the speaker's spontaneous reply (Line 4). The interrupting student's unmitigated disagreement (the underlined part) might have hardly been viewed as an attempt to affiliate herself with the speaker. She might disagree in order to present herself as a “as skilful contestor”, “capable of engaging in an intellectual discussion” (Sifianou, 2012:1560), yet her impulsive analogy was, at least from the speaker's perspective, rather uncalled-for, or he wouldn't have formulated his denial in such a haste (as the underlined part in Line 4 indicates). Although the challenge was targeted at the stance taken by the speaker, to

a certain degree the interruption questioned the speaker's identity as an expert on the topic, and unlike in other situations in which the speaker's response to the interrupting student would trigger laughter among the audience, the interruption in this extract was met with silence.

However, this clash did not result in the end of the ritualistic self-display: as the talk further unfolded, the interrupting student made further interruptions in the form of an 'intellectual discussion'. Interestingly, both the interrupting student and the speaker engaged in an exchange again, supposedly to enhance their faces:

(5) 1 hour 33 minutes and 25 seconds into the talk

01 S: 人最重要的能力，动物最大的区别是什么，就是人不仅能够创造使用工具，最重要的是。还可以携带工具。

02 X: [低语]

03 T: 可是猩猩也会携带工具。

04 S: 不，猩猩携带工具只是为了满足单项任务，他不会保持在身上，让它成为自己身体的一部分，只有人才能把这个工具变成人的身体的一部分而这个被变成身体一部分的工具是什么？就是我们的语言…

05 → T: 哈哈！

06 S: 就是我们的语言/

07 → T: 他说我们有带工具，这个工具是语言/

08 T: [被高音覆盖]

09 S: [高音]因为我们说话，因为我们能用语言表征那些不在当下存在的对象

01 S: The most significant ability of mankind, the one that distinguishes human from animals, is not simply the ability to create and use the tools. The most significant ability, is to carry the tools all along.

02 X: [murmured]

03 T: But chimpanzees are also able to carry the tools all along.

04 S: No. Chimpanzees carry tools only for a single task. They will not make the tools part of their bodies. Only mankind is able to turn the tool into part of the body and do you know what part of body it is? It's our language....

05 → T: Haha!

06 S: It is our language/

07 → T: He said that we carry our tool all along and this tool is our language/

08 [inaudible overlap]

09 S: [volume up] Because we can talk. We can use our language to represent those objects that are absent at the moment.

As this extract reveals, at the beginning of the interaction the speaker used the interruption to ritualistically display his knowledge, by transforming the interruption into an intellectual dialogue (Line 4). The interrupter's last turn is too inaudible to be transcribed (Line 9). Neither the speaker nor the interrupter dropped out in each TCU (Lines 7, 8 & 9) but judging from the adjacent pair, this elongated overlapping was the speaker's orientations to the interruption and possibly that of the interrupter: both the speaker and the interrupter intended to speak through the overlap, showcasing that neither of them assumed their position of being the addressee. By virtue of greater knowledge, the professor has an institutionalised right to disagree with students; in contrast, a student's disagreement with a professor is potentially face-threatening that challenges the professor's professional identity, and the force of the challenge can increase

with the directness of the utterance (Norrick 1991: 72ff). What is noteworthy here, however, is that the speaker did not simply silence the interrupting student (Line 4). Rather, he took an argumentative stance in negating the proposition of the interrupting student (a simple “No” as underlined in the transcription) without making her the target of the criticism (as “you are wrong” would do).

Following this response, the interrupting student made another attempt to ritualistically display herself as a knowledgeable person, on this occasion by addressing other audience members rather than the speaker himself. First, she made a loud laughter (Line 5) and then talked about the speaker in third person (Line 7). While one can only speculate about what might have motivated the interrupting student to engage in this form of interruption, it is possible that the intellectual ‘exchange’ encouraged her to trespass her normal rights. It is relevant here to refer to the fact that ritual chains (Collins 2004) tend to occur in an increasingly active fashion, therefore, it might be that the interrupting student acted under what ritual scholars (Goffman 1967; Durkheim 1995; Collins 2004) would define as *the spell of the ritual moment*. Irrespective of the motivation of the interrupting student, the speaker seemed to evaluate her behaviour negatively on this occasion, as his raised volume of voice indicates. This final ritualistic self-display disrupted the “one-at-a-time” (Drew 2009: 72) interaction that had been progressively formed all along.

The examples studied in this section illustrate the limited life-cycle of ritualistic self-display in the interaction. With the development of the interaction, this ritualistic practice that enhanced face to a certain point started to trigger negative evaluations, which is logical if one considers that the practice of the interrupter was only ritualistic but not ritual, and as such it lacked conventionalisation and unavoidably trespassed basic rights and obligations. As a result, the interaction became more and more hostile. Following the interaction featured in extract (5), the interrupting student went silent for a while. However, ritualistic self-display, like any interactional ritual, has the potential to be reactivated when situation changes, as the following section illustrates.

#### *Ritualistic self-display as a shared face-saving/enhancing resource*

When the talk ended, the host launched the conventional question-and-answer section. Once this section was formally opened, the interrupting student and the speaker re-engaged in an interaction, on this occasion in a highly face-conscious manner:

(6) 1 hour 45 minutes and 45 seconds into the talk

- 01 H: 大家有没有什么问题来问 S老师 ... 有没有什么问题。  
 02 → S: 那她的问题最多让她来说, 给她, 她的问题最多。  
 03 H: 你的问题。  
 04 → T: 我没有问题, 就是我无法用语言来表达, 是因为我还没有想好。  
 05 X: 哈哈\*\*  
 06 S: 好, 呵呵, 活学活用, 呵呵, 那就好好想想, 想清楚再告诉我。
- 01 H: Does anyone have any question to ask Professor S...Is there any question  
 02 → S: She seems to have the most questions. Pick her. Give her the opportunity, since she has the most questions.  
 03 H: What's your question

- 04 → T: I don't have any question. It's just that I can't use words to express myself, because I haven't figured it out.
- 05 X: haha\*\*
- 06 S: Well, heh-heh, this is called creative learning, heh-heh. Think it over and talk to me when [you] have figured it out.

The underlined utterance in the transcript (Line 4) indicated a reformulation of the speaker's viewpoint in the middle of his talk (not included in the data), which elicited another gale of laughter. According to interactional ritual theory (Collins 2004), the long pause after an invitation to ask questions in public does not indicate that the audience has nothing to say, or that the speech has been boring (which was certainly not the case here). Rather, this pause may be simply due to that the speaker is “elevated into too remote a realm, surrounded by too much of an aura of respect to be approached” (Collins 2004: 72). At this point, the interactional trajectory prompted the speaker to nominate the previous interrupter as the first questioner (Line 2), supposedly not only to enhance audience participation but also to boost his own image. What is worth to note here is that the interrupting student managed to minimise the face-loss of both parties by opting out: In this face-sensitive situation, she attributed her rejection to her incompetence by quoting the speaker (Line 4). By so doing, she decreased the imposition of her negatively assessed interruption (Section 4.2) and presented herself as an attentive listener. This move opened up the way for the speaker to make a jocular response. Arguably, by appointing the interrupting student the speaker attempted to restore the face-threat the awkward situation triggered (see Extracts 4 and 5) and also to present himself as an open-minded person.

## Discussion and conclusion

It has been argued that giving face is about respecting someone's personality, and as such, it interrelates with identity (Spencer-Oatey 2007; Ting-Toomey 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Kadar 2016). In Chinese social interactions, in particular, face “defines not only the Chinese social self, but also the self-concept and the relational self” (Gao 2009: 179). In this paper, this sense of “social self” is to a large extent pre-set in the institutional context. Considering the reputation of Chinese institutional contexts as hierarchical, one could have assumed that in the face-sensitive context the interruption may not be tolerated. However, as the data in this paper has illustrated, the self-concept and the relational self can be negotiated dynamically as an interaction progresses, i.e., interruption - in particular, the ritualistic type that we have studied here – may trigger complex interactional evaluations. This finding, in turn, illustrates the importance of bottom-up and interaction-based research in the investigation of Chinese phenomena of hierarchy.

In technical interactional terms, the interruptions in the data illustrate that the sequentially interruptive moves can be interactionally cooperative as well as intrusive. This shows that interruption as a ritualistic self-display can have multiple functions at the interpersonal level, ranging from constructing (or destructing) solidarity to enhancing (or damaging) identity associated face when an awkward situation emerges. Ritualistic interruption is triggered by interpersonal scenarios in which the interrupting person feels somehow entitled to interrupt, either because interruption is deemed to be capable of enhancing the interrupted speaker's face (e.g., “Alright” in Extract 1), or because by so doing the interrupting person may enhance her or his face, especially when such interruption earns a compliment in return (e.g., “You are right” in Extract 3). In a similar way with other interruptive interpersonal scenarios such as heckling - in which responding to the heckler is normative and expected behavior - in the data studied the interrupted speaker was expected to respond to preserve his face and related positive

identity (cf. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013). The way in which one manages to handle interruption is essential. For instance, in our data the lecturer managed to impress the audience by keeping the responses flexible and humorous in most of the time, hence enhancing his face as a tolerant or open-minded lecturer. While there was a situational pressure on him to protect and enhance his professional face by attending to the voice from “below,” he ultimately encouraged ritualistic self-display, hence triggering a chain of interruptive ritual interactions in which he could boost his own image. And the interrupting student’s ritualistic self-display created an opportunity for the interrupted speaker to affiliate himself with the audience and enhance his relational face by encouraging more interruptions.

Simply describing ritualistic self-display in interruption as “socially appropriate” would not properly capture its multifunctions and complexities in interpersonal interaction. The Chinese context of this study has been particularly relevant to illustrate this point, considering the conventional power distance between Chinese lecturers and students. The operation of self-display in this context illustrates that ritualistic self-display is a noteworthy phenomenon, which will hopefully be explored in other situations and in other lingua-cultures.

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