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Force dynamics of (im)politeness: evidence from (im)politeness of Chinese parent–child discourse in family mealtimes

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Abstract: In the second-wave, research on (im)politeness has experienced a discursive turn that witnesses an increasing interest in the naturally occurring and situated discourse. Although numerous researchers have evaluated interactional orientation of (im)politeness via a wide range of pragmatic phenomena, few studies have probed the dynamic characteristics and pragmatic functions of (im)politeness in discourse generated in children’s daily communication, such as parent–child discourse in family mealtimes. Based on the discourse between Chinese preschool children and their caregivers, the current study addresses the internal characteristics of (im)politeness by exploring how force dynamics can be formed and mediated in family mealtimes through the lens of dinner table rituals. Furthermore, the pragmatic functions of (im)politeness were revealed from the ritual perspective, namely, enhancing language socialization, expressing emotions, indicating meaningful educational directions, and guiding children’s moral practice. Utilizing force dynamics of (im)politeness, the current study aims to provide new insights for the understanding of children’s (im)politeness and emphasize the critical place that ritual occupies in (im)politeness research.

Keywords: force dynamics; (im)politeness; parent–child discourse; family mealtimes; dinner table rituals

1 Introduction

Shifting from the focus concentrated on the interpretation of isolated words or phrases to the co-construction of interactive communication, the discursive turn in

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the second wave of (im)politeness pays attention to “situated, naturally occurring discourse data” (Grainger 2011: 170) and highlights that the value of (im)politeness lies in discursive negotiation between the participants (Leitner and Jucker 2021: 692). Hence, the dynamic nature of (im)politeness has manifested in the productions and evaluations of interactions (Gao and Liu 2023; Xia and Lan 2019). Specifically, current (im)politeness research examines interactional relations constructed in dialogic literary gatherings (Llopis et al. 2016), on-line and off-line polylogues (Dobs and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013; Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2011), clinical discourse (Kazeem and Alabi 2018), court discourse (Mısır and Akn 2024), social media (Garre-León 2025), and ritual (Kádár and Ning 2019), demonstrating the discursive navigation modeled by (im)politeness. However, most studies evaluate adults’ (im)politeness interactions. Few concentrate on natural and daily occurring (im)polite interactions in children’s communication (Cashman 2006) or highlight the dynamicity of children’s (im)politeness. A plausible reason could be attributed to the dearth and rareness of naturally occurring language data in everyday contexts (Culpeper 2011: 9).

To fill this gap, the current research draws on data from children’s naturally occurring discourse in family mealtimes with their caregivers, and utilizes Talmy’s (1988) force dynamics to capture the dynamicity of (im)politeness. The current research chooses family mealtimes as data for the following reasons: (1) family mealtimes have been regarded as significant timing for children’s acquisition of “cultural norms, expectations, and assumptions” (Caronia and Colla 2024: 1); (2) the dinner table serves as a critical site for interactional practice – it is not only rich with language, but also provides high quality input and immerses children in a wide array of language uses (Spagnola and Fiese 2007); and (3) it promotes the process of language socialization through collaborative construction of dinner table rituals (Ochs and Shohet 2006), which provide a series of rules for the evaluation of (im)politeness (Xia and Lan 2019).

Therefore, the current research constructs a force dynamics of (im)politeness model to investigate the force interaction in (im)politeness, and illustrate parent–child discourse in family mealtimes through the lens of rituals. By systematically examining the force interaction of children’s (im)politeness, the current research aims to solve the following questions:

- 1) How does force dynamics of (im)politeness form and mediate the parent–child discourse of family mealtimes?
- 2) What are the pragmatic functions of (im)politeness from the perspective of ritual in parent–child discourse in family mealtimes?

The paper is organized as follows: the first section reviews previous research on children’s (im)politeness. Moreover, a brief comment on children’s (im)politeness research has been made. The subsequent section provides a force dynamics of the

(im)politeness model based on Talmy's (1988) force dynamics model. Based on this, the analytical framework of the current research has been built through the lens of ritual. Further sections focus on the methodology, data, and analysis. Finally, the findings and implications for further research will be demonstrated.

2 (Im)politeness in child language

(Im)politeness constitutes an important section in interpersonal communication, as the following quote shows:

(Im)politeness is an evaluative attitude, ranging on a positive-negative continuum, towards specific in-context-behaviors. Such behaviors are viewed positively – considered “polite” – when they are in accord with how one wants them to be, how one expects them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be. The converse is the case for behaviors considered “impolite” (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021: 147).

In this definition, the centrality of norms, i.e., expected behaviors and social oughts, serves as fundamental pillars in (im)politeness (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021). Furthermore, Culpeper and Tantucci (2021) indicate that the absence of expected or socially acceptable behaviors, especially in contexts characterized by asymmetrical power dynamics between adults and children, can result in heightened impoliteness, manifesting the significant place that (im)politeness occupies in child language.

In terms of linguistic and social dimensions, research on typically developed children's politeness can be divided into three categories: (1) research investigating lexical forms of politeness markers¹ (Ervin-Tripp et al. 1990; Greif and Gleason 1980), honorifics (Ahn 2020; Burdelski 2010), impoliteness words (Rahayu and Setiawan 2021); (2) research elucidating speech acts or strategies that are related with (im) politeness, such as requests (Baroni and Axia 1989; Nguyen and Nguyen 2016), apologies (Ely and Gleason 2006), irony (Filippova and Astington 2008; Whalen and Pexman 2010), threats (Church and Hester 2012) and impoliteness strategies (Cashman 2006); (3) the social factors that influence children's politeness, e.g., the impact of social power (such as the asymmetrical power between parents and children) (Chen and Yang 2023; Ladegaard 2004), social distance (such as different degrees of intimacy between close friends and classmates) (Chang and Ren 2020), and cultural influences (such as Western-Eastern contrasts) (Broesch et al. 2017).

¹ Kádár and House's (2020) work classified the word “please” as a requestive marker, which the authors of this article agree with. However, to align with the technical terms which appear in the referred research, the authors have decided to use the technical term “politeness markers” instead.

Moreover, Chinese scholars also examine politeness-related requests initiated by children with pragmatic impairments. For instance, Yan and Yu (2009) reported that regarding polite request strategies, there is no significant grade difference in primary school children with learning disabilities (LD), while the typically developed children show a trend of gradual improvement with increasing grade levels. Yan's (2011) results demonstrated that the developmental trajectory of children with language learning disabilities (LLD) manifests a delay in request strategies rather than reply strategies, compared with those without LLD.

Although previous research has investigated children's (im)politeness in a wide range, some limitations should be noted: (1) the lack of investigation that views (im)politeness as a dynamic continuum; (2) the naturally-occurring interaction in the research of children's (im)politeness are relatively scarce, with most studies on children's (im)politeness targeting single words or short stretches of discourse, which might sacrifice the dynamicity of interaction to some extent; (3) although (im)politeness “imbue[s] the operation of ritual practices” (Kádár 2017: 220), which “appear in the whole spectrum of human interaction” (Kádár 2024: 13), relevant research has been barely discussed (Kádár and House 2021). For example, ritual in mealtime, which is intertwined with *politeness* routines (Spagnola and Fiese 2007: 285), has seldom been examined through the lens of (im)politeness in children's discourse.

Therefore, the current research will construct a force dynamics of (im)politeness and explore children's (im)politeness in family mealtimes with their caregivers from the perspective of dinner table rituals.

3 Theoretical background

In this section, the force dynamics of the (im)politeness model will be built based on Talmy's (1988) force dynamics. Furthermore, an analytical framework through the lens of ritual will be demonstrated.

3.1 Talmy's force dynamics

Force dynamics, characterized by force interactions “that one entity can bear to another with respect to force” within the structured situation (Talmy 2000b: 10, 12), “functions extensively in the domain of discourse” (Talmy 2000a: 452). Inspired by the concepts from physics, Talmy links action and reaction forces to two force entities in discourse. Specifically, the Agonist (F_{AgO}) is the focal force entity, and the Antagonist (F_{Ant}) refers to the force that opposes the Agonist (Talmy 1988). Normally, the

Agonist tends to exert force or to be overcome, whilst the Antagonist's effects on the Agonist may or may not be overcome, thereby establishing a dynamic force interaction in discourse (Talmy 2000a: 413). The basic elements and relative diagrams of Talmy's force dynamics are presented in Figure 1, and the basic steady-state force-dynamic patterns are in Figure 2.

Figure 2 provides a reference model for interpreting force interaction, and it can be explained as follows: (a) F_{Ant} with greater force overcomes the resistance of F_{Ago} ,

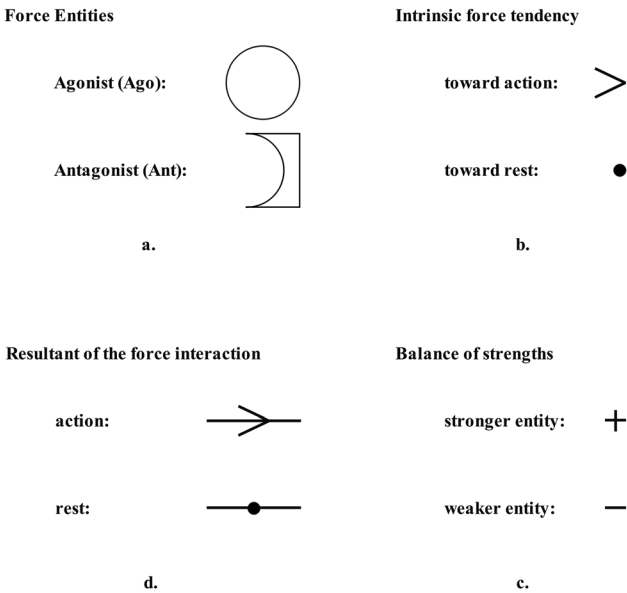


Figure 1: The basic elements and diagrams of force dynamics (taken from Talmy 2000a: 414).

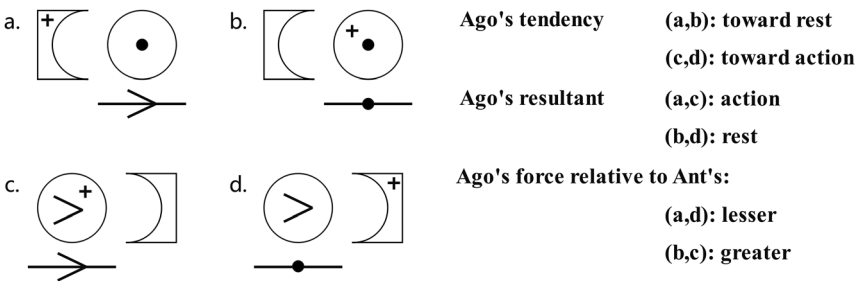


Figure 2: The basic steady-state force-dynamic patterns^a (taken from Talmy 2000a: 415). ^aConsidering that the steady-state force-dynamic patterns are the most basic and fundamental ones, other patterns, such as shifting force-dynamic patterns, are not introduced in this study.

resulting in the motion changed from rest to action; (b) F_{Ago} with greater force blocks the F_{Ant} 's exertion of force, and has not changed its state of rest; (c) F_{Ago} with greater force overcomes the resistance of F_{Ant} , resulting in the motion changed from rest to action; and (d) F_{Ant} with greater force blocks the F_{Ago} 's exertion of force, and has not changed its state of rest.

The force dynamics is particularly evident in children (Yang 2023). Children with F_{Ago} are easily influenced by the adults who exert F_{Ant} , who aim at enabling children to learn social conventions and rituals through language in daily communication.

3.2 Force dynamics of (im)politeness

Employing Talmy's force dynamics into (im)politeness, the current research constructs force dynamics of (im)politeness (see Figure 3).

In Figure 3, A and B are two interactants. The construction of (im)politeness can be reflected in the force interaction between F_{Ago} , which is initiated from A (e.g., children) and F_{Ant} , initiated from B (e.g., adult), from the perspective of (im)politeness in the following models:

1. F_{Ago} in the state of motion possesses greater force, whilst F_{Ant} is distant from F_{Ago} . The dashed lines indicate that F_{Ant} did not get involved in this process. For instance, children utter politeness markers spontaneously without parents' assistance or guidance.
2. F_{Ago} remains in rest state and F_{Ant} does not get involved in changing F_{Ago} 's state at first. Sooner, F_{Ant} leverages external elements, such as dinner table rituals in the current research, and alters the state of F_{Ago} , moving it towards the positive direction, i.e., politeness. For instance, the adult notices that the child did not

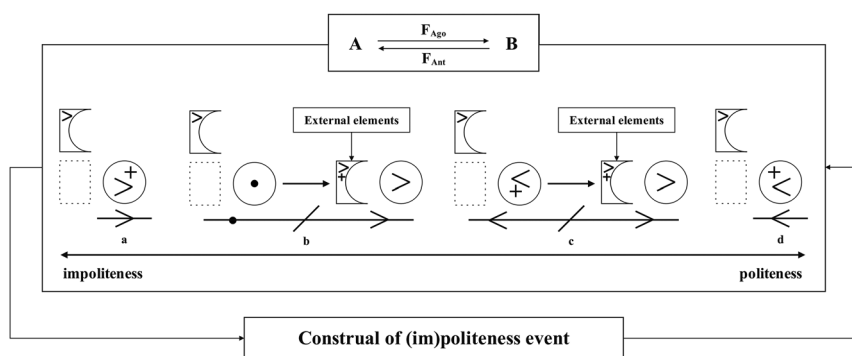


Figure 3: Force dynamic (im)politeness in discourse.

respond to others' kindness and immediately teaches the child to utter "thank you" to express politeness.

3. F_{Ago} moves towards a negative direction, i.e., impoliteness, and F_{Ant} does not get involved to change F_{Ago} 's state at first. Sooner, F_{Ant} leverages external power from the ritual and overcomes F_{Ago} , transforming the F_{Ago} 's original direction from impoliteness to politeness. For example, the adult realizes the child's impoliteness and transforms it into politeness under the guidance of rituals.
4. Represents the same procedure of (a) but with a different direction – specifically, one that leans toward impoliteness. For instance, children utter impolite words without the supervisions of adults.

Therefore, through the force interaction between F_{Ant} and F_{Ago} , the current research demonstrates a force dynamics continuum of (im)politeness.

3.3 Analytical framework from the perspective of ritual

As Kádár (2017: 220) highlights, (im)politeness "imbue[s] the operation of ritual practices", and can be "best examined from the point of view of ritual" (House et al. 2025: 98).

Research on ritual and (im)politeness examines various types of discourse, extending beyond mere public discourse (Ide 1998), Chinese university military training discourse (Kádár and House 2021), small talk (Xia et al. 2023), and encompasses different genres, including historical Chinese letters (Kádár 2019), political advice in Chinese state media (Kádár et al. 2020), and other ritual phenomena, such as ritual public communal humiliation (Kádár and Ning 2019) and self-denigration in Chinese (Kádár et al. 2023a). In these studies, the core position occupied by rituals in (im)politeness has been emphasized, underscoring the importance of analyzing (im)politeness through the lens of ritual. Moreover, scholars have identified ritual behavior as conventionalized and interactionally co-constructed practice (Kádár 2024; Kádár and House 2021; Xia et al. 2023). Various ritual phenomena across linguacultures, such as politeness makers (Kádár and House 2019), honorifics (Kádár et al. 2023b), and offering food and alcohol (House et al. 2025) have also been observed.

Recently, Kádár et al. (2025) identified ritual features and strategies of gift offering and revealed that their dynamics vary across interaction, paying attention to the dynamics of interaction. To further explore the dynamics of ritual behavior, i.e., dinner table ritual in the current research, the analytical framework of the current research is established as follows:

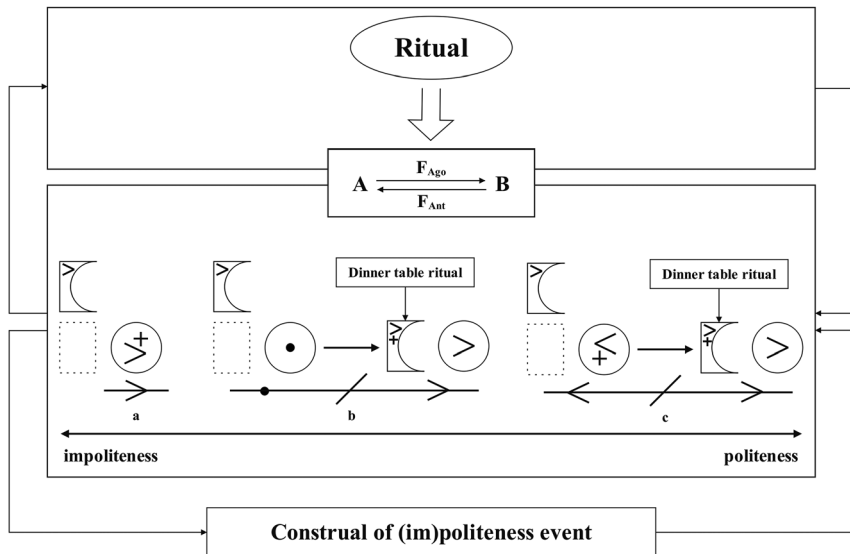


Figure 4: Analytical framework of the current research.

In Figure 4, similar to the prior studies that have been introduced before, ritual has also been put in a critical place to indicate its major impact on the force dynamics of (im)politeness. Specifically, ritual is manifested in “conventionalized and contextually expected forms” (Kádár 2024: 2) and “is a formalized and recurrent action” (Kádár 2024: 12). It is rooted deeply in social groups and provides accessible and reliable regulations or norms that influence the force of interaction in the construction of (im)politeness. In the current research, which concentrates on the impact of dinner table ritual on parent–child discourse in family mealtimes, the “External elements” represented in Figure 3 are replaced with dinner table rituals. Meanwhile, Model (d) presented in Figure 3 does not occur in Figure 4. This is because during mealtimes, children’s impoliteness is consistently corrected through the supervision and guidance of adults. Therefore, we mainly focused our discussion on the first three models.

4 Data

Children’s interaction is a fruitful and fresh field for investigating the dynamic nature of (im)politeness in dinner table rituals. Targeting preschoolers aged 3–6 years old, we collected 10 pairs of middle-income households’ family talk in

family mealtimes, and conducted a qualitative case study. Both parents have a university degree or higher, are Mandarin speakers, and are of Han Chinese descent. We collected approximately 117 minutes of audio-recorded interactions. Each recording ranged from 8 minutes to 19 minutes. To obtain naturally occurring discourse and avoid interference from filming equipment, the parents were simply told to record an audio segment when they had a meal. No specific information or instructions were given.

In order to follow the standard ethics procedure of pragmatic research (cf. Locher and Bolander 2019), informed consent were sent and collected from the children's parents and the data has been guaranteed to only be used for academic reasons. All personal information, such as the participants' names, age, gender and other personal information, were removed. An anonymized form was used when we transcribed the data.

In the transcripts, the following conventions were used:

- (1) CHI was used to identify the child, MOT for mother, FAT for father, GMOT for grandmother
- (2) a simple and accessible way of transcription was applied (cf. House et al. 2021), and several transcription conventions were adopted from the Jeffersonian transcription system. For instance, “↑” and “↓” represent rising and falling tone, “(*italic*)” refers to contextual information, (6.0) means a timed pause (in this case, 6 seconds), that is long enough to indicate a time.²

5 Data analysis

The following section will examine the force dynamics of (im)politeness in parent–child family mealtimes in account of dinner table rituals. Furthermore, pragmatic functions of dinner table rituals in parent–child discourse from the perspective of (im)politeness, will be discussed.

5.1 The force dynamics of (im)politeness in family mealtimes in account of rituals

Based on Figure 4, force dynamics of (im)politeness in family mealtimes can be categorized into three models (Model a, b and c), in accordance with the force interaction of discourse.

² Detailed information could be found at <https://universitytranscriptions.co.uk/jefferson-transcription-system-a-guide-to-the-symbols/>.

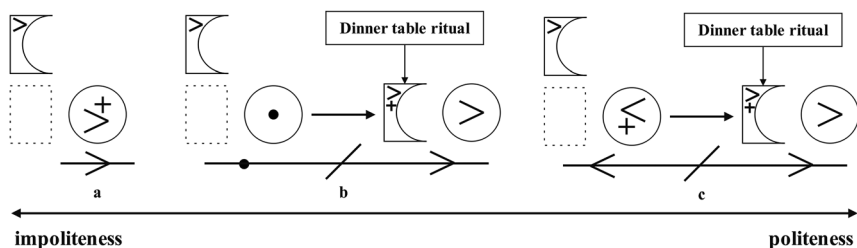


Figure 5: Models of force dynamics of (im)politeness in family mealtimes.

The models of force dynamics of (im)politeness in family mealtimes are the core elements in Figure 5, demonstrating the force interaction of F_{Ago} and F_{Ant} . In the following section, each of them will be illustrated with corresponding extracts.

5.1.1 Model (a): force dynamics of politeness

Asian cultures, as high-context and high-politeness cultures, are deeply rooted in the concept of ritual and Confucian cultural values. They highly attach politeness routines to the “central goals of preschool education” (Burdelski 2010). For instance, Chinese children at two years old could spontaneously employ politeness routines, such as 谢谢 *xiexie* (‘thanks’) to express politeness (Wang 2013). This kind of force dynamics of politeness has been manifested in Model (a).

Extract (1) ((Mom serves dishes for the child. Recorded on 30th, Mar, 2025, 8:08 am. by the mother.))

- 1 妈妈： 哎呀，看我给你盛这么多肉肉。
MOT: Oh, look how much meat I’ve served you.
- 2 儿童： 啊，妈妈真的吗？ 我吃肉肉都吃不够↑。 谢谢妈妈↑。
CHI: Wow, Mom, really? I can never get enough of meat↑. Thank you, Mom↑.
- 3 妈妈： 不客气。
MOT: You’re welcome.

In this extract, when mother serves dishes for the child, the child uses the structure of “modal particles + rhetorical question” to intensify the joy. Furthermore, the rising tone reflects the child’s confirmation and praise of the mother’s behavior. The employment of “thank you” manifests the child’s politeness. In accordance with the dinner table rituals, one should express gratitude for those who provide and serve food. From the perspective of force dynamics of (im)politeness, the F_{Ago} of the child has a strong internal drive and moves towards a positive evaluative attitude,

i.e., politeness, through the employment of the approbation maxim (Leech 1983). Furthermore, the utterance of a politeness marker without the enhancement of F_{Ant} demonstrates children's awareness and utilization of politeness.

5.1.2 Model (b): force dynamics of transformation from a resting state to politeness

Researchers have suggested that children's politeness is often linked to a subservient or deferential demeanor, especially in interactions with adults (Bavin 2009; Mills 2003). Therefore, in parent–child discourse, a significant aspect is to guide children to express politeness markers (Gleason et al. 1984), which results in Model (b).

Extract (2) ((The child is dining out with their parents when a waiter places freshly fried French fries in front of the child. Recorded at 4th, April, 2025, 12:26 am. by the father.))

1 服务员：给你，炸好啦，叔给你放这行吗？小心一点，凉一凉，有点热。

Waiter: Here you go. It's freshly fried. Uncle will put it here, okay? Be careful. Let it cool down a bit. It's hot.

2 ((儿童只是盯着眼前的食物，没有回复服务员。))
((The child did not respond to the waiter but stared at the food.))

3 爸爸：谢谢谢谢。谢谢叔叔。

FAT: Thank you, thank you. Say "thank you, Uncle."

4 儿童：谢谢。

CHI: Thank you.

5 服务员：不客气。

Waiter: You are welcome.

6 爸爸：谢谢啊。

FAT: Thank you.

In this case, the newly served food attracted the child's full attention and the child merely stared at the food in front of him/her without responding to the waiter's concerned words, indicating that the child was in a resting state (i.e., the children did not respond to the surrounding world). Follow the instruction of the ritual that one should express gratitude towards those who serve food, the father expressed "thank you" first to set an example for his child, and then asked the child to express gratitude in the form of "politeness marker + address". This changes the child's original force tendency, and the child mimicked the politeness marker "thank you" to manifest politeness. From this perspective, the F_{Ago} 's state of rest was changed into a positive attitude to politeness under the guidance of F_{Ant} in accordance with dinner table rituals.

5.1.3 Model (c): force dynamics of transformation from impoliteness to politeness

Intentional maintenance of silence could be a signal for “disagreement/discontentment with S’s utterance” (Kaul de Marlangeon and Alba-Juez 2012: 76 [with S standing for speaker]) and thereby “establish a confrontation” (Kaul de Marlangeon and Alba-Juez 2012: 83), serving as the function of impoliteness. Similarly, an ancient Chinese ritual book for children named 弟子规 *Di zi gui* (‘Ritual for being a good child’) also advocates that 父母呼, 应勿缓 *fu mu hu, ying wu huan* (‘When parents call, don’t be slow to answer’). This indicates that children’s silence to their parents’ utterance is impolite behavior.

Extract (3) ((After the child finishes seeing the doctor, the parents take the child to have a meal. The child was in a bit of a sulk because his/her mother had not accompanied him/her into the consulting room at the hospital earlier. Recorded at 23rd, Mar, 2025, 6:32 pm. by the father.))

1 妈妈: 宝宝, 很疼很疼吗? 还是就有一点点疼?

MOT: Baby, does it hurt a lot? Or just a little bit?

2 ((儿童沉默6秒))

CHI: (6.0).

3 爸爸: 妈妈问你呢↓。

FAT: Your mother is asking you↓.

4 妈妈: 有多疼?

MOT: How much does it hurt?

5 儿童: 一般般的疼。你咋不进去一起玩呢? 那块可好玩可好玩了。

CHI: It hurts moderately. Why don’t you go in and play together? It’s really, really fun over there.

6 妈妈: 它就让一个大人陪同。

MOT: The hospital only allows one adult to accompany.

Dinner table rituals are often a talk-enhanced practice, encouraging emotional and social feedbacks (Brumberg-Kraus 2020: 333). In this case, rather than responding promptly to the mother’s concerned words, the child remains silent for 6 seconds, which is impoliteness and violates rituals. The child’s father has obviously sensed the child’s impoliteness, since he utilized a falling tone to ask the child to answer his/her mother’s question. Under the father’s guidance, the child responds to the mother without hesitation and asks the mother why she did not accompany him/her into the consulting room earlier. Moreover, his/her description of the consulting room indicates his/her sense of regret. This series of utterances reflects the child’s positive attitude towards his/her mother’s question, and thereby shows politeness. Hence,

within the guidelines of dinner table rituals, the adult (father in this case) who processes greater F_{Ant} overcomes the child's smaller F_{Ago} . Further, the direction of F_{Ago} shifts from negative direction, i.e., impoliteness, to positive, i.e., politeness. This case demonstrates the dynamic alteration of Model (c), i.e., the force interaction transformed from impoliteness to politeness.

5.2 Pragmatic functions of (im)politeness from a ritual perspective

Ritual is so relevant to routines of daily interaction, and its relation with (im)politeness can help one “gain insight into various issues surrounding (im)politeness” (Kádár 2024: 20–21). Therefore, through force dynamic (im)politeness, the current research further investigates the function of (im)politeness through the lens of ritual.

5.2.1 Functions of constructing language socialization paradigm

The language socialization paradigm is not only about acquiring language, but also includes the process of socializing children into the culturally-specific way of speaking (Caronia and Colla 2024). Given the fact that children are often taught to avoid certain words and expressions in order to demonstrate politeness at a very young age (Bavin 2009; Chang and Ren 2020), the employment of language in accordance of Chinese culture serves as an essential component of dinner table rituals. Normally, parents tend to regulate children's behavior and apprentice conventions in mealtimes from the perspective of ritual.

Extract (4) *((The child is eating shrimp and wants to have more shrimp. In Chinese, the homophones of 虾 xia ('shrimp') and 瞎 xia ('blind') might lead to pragmatic failures and impoliteness. Recorded at 6th, Apr, 2025, 4:23 pm. by the mother.))*

1 儿童: 虾, 虾, 虾.

CHI: Shrimp (blind),³ shrimp (blind), shrimp (blind).

2 妈妈: 你吃完了吗? 你跟谁也不能说瞎啊。你应该说, 妈妈, 我要吃虾。

MOT: Have you finished eating? You mustn't say “blind” to anyone. You should say, “Mom, I want to eat some shrimp.”

3 儿童: 妈妈, 我要吃虾。

CHI: Mom, I want shrimp.

3 The word in the brackets is a homophone of “shrimp” in Chinese, which has a different form and meaning, that is, “blind”.

In mealtimes, a formalized and recurrent action of dinner table rituals is to make polite requests (Ogiermann 2015). In this case, the child's request for food is deemed inappropriate and impolite (line 3). To address this, the mother employs a ritual-based polite utterance. She corrects the child's expression by incorporating a proper address and a WANT statement, thereby avoiding ambiguity arising from homophones. The child realized his/her impoliteness and imitated the mother's expressions to express respect. The force dynamics of (im)politeness in this case is demonstrated in Model (c). That is, the child's employment of improper word triggers misunderstanding, and violates the regulations of dinner table rituals. This behavior leads to impoliteness in interaction. Empowered by ritual, the mother gains more F_{Ant} and pushes the child to utter more polite expressions. In this process, F_{Ant} overcomes F_{Ago} with the guidance of ritual, and changes F_{Ago} 's state from impoliteness to politeness.

What should be noticed in this case is the parents' correction of the child's language. In this process, through employing a series of speech acts, namely, a request for information (Have you finished eating?), a request to do X (You mustn't say "blind" to anyone), and a suggestion⁴ (You should say, "Mom, I want to eat some shrimp."), the parent regulates the child's expression. From an applied perspective, identifying instances of pragmatic failure and promoting clear, precise expressions to avoid ambiguity, serve to fulfill the functions of the language socialization paradigm.

5.2.2 Functions of expressing emotions

Mealtimes, a major site for interactional practice (Zotевska and Martín-Bylund 2022), are critical for children's sociability and socialization (Blum-Kulka 1997) and provide a place for observing how language expresses emotions.

Extract (5) ((*The mother asked the child about the taste of the food. Recorded at 2nd, Apr, 2025, 7:46 pm. by the mother.*))

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | 妈妈: 好吃吗? |
| | MOT: Is it delicious? |
| 2 | 儿童: 嗯, 非常的熟。 |
| | CHI: Mm, it's really well-cooked. |
| 3 | 妈妈: 非常的熟是什么意思? |
| | MOT: What do you mean by "really well-cooked"? |
| 4 | 儿童: 就是很好吃。 |
| | CHI: It means it's really delicious. |

⁴ This category relies on a finite speech act typology that is widely used in ritual (Edmondson and House 1981; Edmondson et al. 2023; Kádár et al. 2025).

- 5 妈妈： 嗯， 谢谢你啊。
 MOT: Mm, thank you.
- 6 儿童： 非常的可口↑。
 CHI: It's really tasty↑.
- 7 妈妈： 谢谢， 多吃点。
 MOT: Thanks. Eat more.
- 8 儿童： 太可口了↑。
 CHI: It's so delicious↑.
- 9 妈妈： 嗯， 好。
 MOT: Mm, okay.
- 10 儿童： 超级好吃↑。
 CHI: It's extremely delicious↑.
- 11 妈妈： 那你就多吃点。
 MOT: Eat more.

The force dynamics of (im)politeness of this Extract 5 are demonstrated in Model (b). Specifically, in this case, this child used different adjectives and various intensifiers to compliment his/her mother at mealtime. Specifically, the child first used well-cooked to describe the food, which is a neutral evaluation of food, indicating a resting state of the child's F_{Ago} . The mother was confused and asked the potential meaning of the child's expression. Next, the child used various adjectives, including "delicious" to describe the taste of food, reflecting his/her love and politeness. The mother's formulative expressions driven by ritual, such as "thank you" and "eat more" (cf. House et al. 2025), further trigger the child's positive evaluation. The employment of adjectives, such as "tasty", and intensifiers including "really", "so" and "extremely", indicates the child's positive attitude, hence the politeness.

From the perspective of emotively loaded responses of the child, e.g., the rising tone and the various types of linguistic forms of intensifiers and adjectives, his/her strong affection towards his/her mother has been demonstrated, indicating the functions of expressing emotions through (im)politeness.

5.2.3 Functions of educational direction

As for Chinese people, children's education is one of the most important things. In the widely-spread 神童诗 *shen tong shi* ('Poems for Child Prodigies'), a poem that mainly aims to encourage children to study, one line particularly emphasizes the significance of education and states 万般皆下品，惟有读书高 *Wan ban jie xia pin, wei you du shu gao* ('All occupations are inferior; only reading is exalted').⁵ See the following examples:

5 Detailed information can be found at <https://www.gushiwen.cn/shiwen/9a3dca3d009f.aspx>.

Extract (6) ((*The child was eating with his/her mother and grandmother. They were discussing who cooked better, mother or grandmother. Recorded at 1st, Apr, 2025, 6:09 pm. by the mother.*))

- 1 妈妈: 鱼香肉丝好吃还是妈妈的咖喱牛肉饭好吃啊?
MOT: Which is more delicious, the fish-flavored shredded pork or Mom's curry beef rice?
- 2 儿童: 咖喱牛肉饭好吃。
CHI: The curry beef rice is more delicious.
- 3 妈妈: 耶, 我赢啦。
MOT: Yeah, I won.
- 4 姥姥: 那就多吃点吧, 好吃。
GMOT: Then eat more. It's delicious.
- 5 儿童: 姥姥输了。
CHI: Grandma lost.
- 6 姥姥: 姥姥输了, 下次要努力。输了的人不要紧的, 只要下次努力就会成功的, 是不是啊?
GMOT: Grandma lost. I'll have to try harder next time. It doesn't matter if someone loses. As long as they try hard next time, they will succeed, right?
- 7 儿童: 就像航天火箭, 如果发射失败, 再重新发射。
CHI: Just like a space rocket. If the launch fails, launch it again.
- 8 姥姥: 对, 再重新设计发射, '孩名'说的对。你准备设计航天母舰? 设计多少号航天母舰呢?
GMOT: That's right. Redesign and launch it again. What CHI said is right. Are you going to design an aircraft carrier? How many aircraft carriers are you going to design?
- 9 儿童: 我是制作航天飞机。我不用制作火箭和助飞器了, 直接做航天飞机上天发射。
CHI: I'm going to make a space shuttle. I don't need to make a rocket and a booster. I'll directly make a space shuttle and launch it into the sky.
- 10 姥姥: 那就更先进了, 是不是?
GMOT: Then it's even more advanced, isn't it?
- 11 妈妈: 那你太厉害了。靠你了, 儿子, 中国未来靠你。
MOT: Then you're so amazing. It's up to you, son. The future of China depends on you.
- 12 姥姥: 好好学习吧。
GMOT: Study hard, then.

Different from Extract (5), in this case, after pointing out that the mother's cooking was delicious, the child bluntly pointed out that the grandmother had lost (line 5), suggesting that the grandmother's cooking was not as good as the mother's. This behavior hurt the grandmother's positive face, and was impolite. However, the grandmother took this opportunity to educate the child that winning or losing for a moment was not important, and what mattered was to keep trying hard next time (line 6). After understanding the grandmother's well-intentioned words, the child quickly understood the grandmother's intention and responded to the grandmother with a positive attitude (line 7), promoting the conversation in a direction of politeness. From the perspective of (im)politeness, this transformation of impoliteness to politeness has been shown in Model (c).

Furthermore, the grandmother also highly praised the child's words and thought that his/her idea was advanced. At this moment, the mother also actively encouraged the child, and grandmother exhorted the child to study hard. At this time, the three of them had completely deviated from the topic of whose food was more delicious to an educational dimension. What should be noticed here is that the grandmother ended the conversation with the sentence "Study hard, then". This expression indicates that Chinese caregivers seem to enjoy educating children while eating rather than meaningless chatting. Through this, mealtimes become an important front for instilling correct values and educational concepts into children.

5.2.4 Functions of moral guidance

Morality, which serves as the fundamental basis for evaluations of social actions and meanings (Haugh et al. 2022; Kádár 2017), enables people to categorize social actions as "good" or "bad", "normal" or "exceptional", "appropriate" or "inappropriate", "polite", "impolite", "overpolite", and so forth (Haugh 2013). Therefore, morality is "what is proper to do and reasonable to expect" (House and Kádár 2023). As argued in the following quote, mealtime is a "moral arena", where

Parents convey the problematic nature of children's (mis)behaviors, evoke presupposed moral orders, and channel children's moral development in culture-specific directions. (Caronia and Colla 2024: 3)

Extract (7) ((The child was eating dinner with his/her parents and talking about things that happened during the daytime. Recorded at 20th, Apr, 2025, 5:06 pm. by the mother.))

1 父亲：那昨天给我看了航天馆，那玩意儿可开心了。

FAT: You showed me the Space Museum yesterday. He/she was really happy then.

- 2 儿童：然后把我的小汽车摔坏了。
CHI: And then someone broke my toy car.
- 3 父亲：那小孩抢他/她的汽车往地上摔。
FAT: That child grabbed his/her car and threw it on the ground.
- 4 母亲：孩名，你说他这个行为是不是不对？
MOT: [Child's name], do you think his behavior was wrong?
- 5 母亲：不礼貌啊，是不是？那你说什么情况下是礼貌的，是对的？
MOT: It was impolite, wasn't it? Then tell me, in what situations is it polite and right?
- 6 儿童：不扔玩具。
CHI: Not throwing toys.
- 7 母亲：咱不管他们，但是咱们不能那么做。
MOT: We don't care about what they do, but we shouldn't act like that.

From a dynamic perspective, this case demonstrates the Model (c), where the child's evaluation of (im)politeness under the guidance of the caregiver reflects the change from impoliteness (throwing toys) to politeness (not throwing toys).

What should be paid more attention to is that in this scenario, after the child and the father had recounted the course of events, the mother took this opportunity to discuss the incident with the child from a moral perspective, hoping that the child would make a moral judgment on it. That is, to determine whether the behavior was right (moral) or wrong (immoral). When the child showed no response, the mother asked the child rhetorically what situations were considered polite and right in order to assess the child's understanding of moral concepts. After evaluating the child's comprehension of "good/bad and polite/impolite manner", the mother reinforced the child's moral outlook, emphasizing that one should not engage in impolite behavior. In this case, telling a child dos and don'ts are morally loaded actions that emerge from social practice-based expectations (Kádár and Márquez-Reiter 2015). Through moral guidance, parents could further cultivate a child's concept of (im)politeness and (im)morality.

6 Conclusion and implications

The utilization of (im)politeness manifests children's competence to configure communicative regulation and adapt to social norms (Akhtar and Herold 2020; Cekaite 2012), serving as a critical lens for interpreting children's socialization and ritualization. From the perspective of rituals, the current study evaluates the force

dynamics of (im)politeness based on Talmy's force dynamics, investigates the force interaction in parent–child family mealtimes, and the functions of (im)politeness. Through the lens of ritual, the current research might shed new light on children's (im)politeness, and provide insights into the dynamicity of (im)politeness.

In this research, two research questions were brought up to examine the (im)politeness dynamics through parent–child family mealtimes:

- 1) How does the force dynamics of (im)politeness form and mediate the parent–child discourse of family mealtimes?
- 2) What are the pragmatic functions of (im)politeness from the perspective of ritual in the parent–child discourse?

As for the first research question, the current research constructed force dynamics of (im)politeness to illustrate the force interaction between children and parents through three models, demonstrating three states of (im)politeness: spontaneous politeness, force tendency from a resting state, i.e., neither politeness nor impoliteness, to politeness, and force tendency from impoliteness to politeness. The employment of Talmy's force dynamics into children's (im)politeness intuitively reflects the functional process of children's discourse, providing a systematic lens to examine how children encode interactional dynamicity through language. Addressing the second research question, four pragmatic functions have been examined within the discourse between parents and children, mediated by the context of dinner table rituals. These functions encompass the establishment of a paradigm for language socialization, the expression of emotions, their role as vital instruments for educational guidance, and the provision of moral instruction. These functions made rituals a crucial component that enables children to acquire knowledges and social norms in a way that social members of their groups accepted, demonstrating “an outcome of synergistic communicative entanglements” of children and ritual (Ochs and Schieffelin 2017).

Paying attention to and understanding the force dynamics of children's (im)politeness is of great significance for interpreting children's discourse, which helps cultivate children's perception of social conventions and guides them to integrate into social collective life appropriately. Theoretically, the force dynamics of (im)politeness model of children's (im)politeness from the ritual perspective in a Chinese context is conducive to advancing the localization of (im)politeness research, aids in the socialization process of Chinese children's language, and provides new research perspectives and ideas for the study of (im)politeness. Practically, seizing the dynamic patterns of children's (im)politeness, parents could use the dinner table as a site for enhancing language socialization and conducting effective emotional communication. While eating, parents could narrate valuable and meaningful

stories or instructions to guide children in the establishment of ideals and value systems, as well as moral practice.

Constrained by the limited data scale, this study did not explore the recurrent ritual features of children's dinner table rituals in depth. In the future, we will expand the data scale to conduct a more thorough investigation. Moreover, longitudinal studies that track the developmental trajectory of children's (im)politeness across different stages through the lens of ritual would provide novel and valuable insights into the field of (im)politeness. Additionally, expanding the scope of research through corpus-based studies that include large, naturalistic datasets would facilitate a more nuanced analysis of children's (im)politeness.

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