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# The intimacy-power relationships in the usage of direct criticism in Chinese: a reflection of rapport management

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(Received 16 July 2024; Revised 14 October 2024; Accepted 23 October 2024)

## Abstract

This study explored the intimacy-power patterns in Chinese direct criticism and how this may reflect native Chinese speakers' consideration of rapport management. With data retrieved from BCC, a representative corpus of modern Chinese, the analyses identified the intimacy degree and power relativity of the interlocutors where direct criticism was used. Results revealed that native Chinese speakers use direct criticism mostly in close and equal relationships followed by distant and equal ones; also, direct criticism with different criticizing markers manifests their uniqueness that close and equal relationships appeared more in criticism with “你太(*nitai*) + adj.”, “我看你(*wokanni*)” and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” while distant and equal relationships appeared more frequently in criticism with “你这(*nizhe*) + n. /adj.”. These results reflect that native Chinese speakers adopt rapport-maintaining/rapport-enhancing orientations by using criticism more often in close and equal relationships, together with their tendency to ignore rapport, especially in distant and equal relationships. To conclude, this study reveals the patterns of intimacy-power relationships in Chinese speakers' usage of direct criticism, which reflects their awareness of rapport management. Overall, it provides insights into our understanding of the nature of the speech act of criticism.

**Keywords:** criticism; interpersonal relationship; rapport management; speech act

## 1. Introduction

In interpersonal communication, rapport is a concept that refers to the relative harmony and smoothness of relations between people, which can be managed/mismanaged through interlocutors' employment of linguistic resources in communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005, 2008). Among these resources, speech act (Austin, 1975), such as request (Ho, 2014), apology (Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020)

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and denial (Ho, 2021), is one of the useful types of linguistic operation that may result in the damage, maintenance or enhancement of interpersonal rapport (Ho, 2014). Among these speech acts, criticism manifests its special role in terms of its face-threatening nature (Brown & Levinson, 1987) in the management of rapport, as the utilization of criticism is to some extent rapport-damaging. Given this map and considering the fact that the speech act of criticism is still one of the frequently occurring speech acts in everyday communication (Douglas, 2002), the current study aims to investigate the patterns of intimacy-power relationships in the usage of Chinese direct criticism and how this can reflect their awareness of managing rapport.

### 1.1. *The speech act of criticism*

Regarding the speech act of criticism, researchers have investigated the usage (Lin, 2020; Dai & Chen, 2024; Badarneh & Damiri, 2024), the interpretation (Weng et al., 2023) and the responses (Ho, 2021; Tian & Ren, 2024) of criticism, among which some studies have provided detailed descriptions of the definition of criticism. For example, Wierzbicka (1987) claims that criticism is the illocutionary act in which the speaker gives a negative evaluation of the behavior, choice, utterance and outcomes for which the listener should take responsibility. Similarly, Zhu and Zhou (2004) refers to the speech act of criticism as the speaker's negative evaluative acts towards the listener. More comprehensively, based on Wierzbicka (1987)'s definition, Nguyen (2008, 2013a, b) further points out that in an instance of criticism, the addresser performs this speech act in the hope of influencing the addressee's future actions or conveying the addresser's dissatisfaction/discontent with regard to what the addressee has done.

Based on the above interpretations, we conclude that a speech act of criticism should at least contain four functional components: (1) the addresser of criticism (i.e., the speaker); (2) the addressee of criticism (i.e., the listener); (3) the behavior/choice of the addressee that arouses the addresser's negative attitudes (i.e., the behavior/choice that leads to criticism); (4) the negative evaluative utterance expressed by the addresser (i.e., the specific utterance of criticism); and in the current study, we only focus on the direct negative evaluation that uses negative words/phrases (e.g. lazy, bad, ugly, etc.) in utterances. Based on the above illustration, the current study defines the speech act of criticism as "the illocutionary act in which the addresser, due to their negative attitudes evoked by the behavior/choice of the addressee, gives direct negative evaluation to the addressee through some understandable utterances with obvious negative words/phrases in an interactive and face-to-face context". Accordingly, the above definition broadly refers to direct criticism and includes the cases when direct criticism is followed by an instance of indirect criticism. For example, the following instance of criticism "You are so careless! You should be careful next time!" is included in the data analyzed in the current study, because it can be regarded as a mixture of direct criticism and indirect criticism (i.e., suggestion) and at least contains the instance of direct criticism.

### 1.2. *The role of intimacy and power in criticism*

The speech act of criticism is not used freely but constrained by the intimacy and power relationship between interlocutors. For example, with regard to Chinese criticism, Zhu (2005), through a Discourse Completion Task, reveals that intimate

speakers use substantial instances of direct blame, while strangers tend to use indirect blame; in addition, speakers of higher power status usually choose direct criticism such as direct prohibition, while speakers of lower power status are more likely to employ indirect criticism such as disagreement. Also, Weng et al. (2023)'s experiments reveal that close relationships, as contrasted with distant relationships, can soften the degree of sarcasm and shorten the processing time of Chinese ironic criticism. Furthermore, studies also report that in the Javanese Arek Cultural Community in Indonesia, the speech act of criticism is regarded as a linguistic resource of social control, which is also significantly influenced by social intimacy between interlocutors (Jauhari et al., 2020).

The above studies all refer to the conception that the degree of intimacy and the relativity of power influence the operation of criticism, which are also the kernel manifestation of interpersonal communication in Chinese society (Fei, 1998; Yuan, 2021, 2022). Specifically, the degree of intimacy refers to the relationship closeness among interlocutors such as “the close/ordinary/distant relationship between interlocutors,” while the relativity of power relates to the hierarchical social status of interlocutors such as “the higher/equal/lower status of addresser compared to the addressee.” For example, Fei (1998) proposes the theory of “the differential mode of association” to describe the social structure of China, referring to the intimacy of relations (i.e., intimacy) and priority in rank (i.e., power). In the domain of linguistics, Yuan (2021, 2022) proposes a model of “*guanxi* (relationship) space” for Chinese society, in which interpersonal relationships are structured based on the horizontal and vertical axes, referring to interpersonal distance and power, respectively.

From these investigations, it becomes evident that the intimacy degree and power relativity can be regarded as two kernel facets that construct the basic interpersonal structure of Chinese society. Therefore, through the exploration of these two aspects in the context of Chinese criticism, the current study was able to discover the situations when Chinese native speakers may use direct criticism frequently and when rarely, to reflect their consideration of rapport management.

### 1.3. Rapport management in the speech act of criticism

#### 1.3.1. The Rapport Management Model

The Rapport Management Model (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005, 2008) is developed to explain how people manage rapport in social interaction. In this model, “rapport,” referring to the relative harmony and smoothness of relations (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2005, 2008), is defined as the positivity-negativity, smoothness-turbulence and warmth-antagonism of relations between interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.98; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009, p.102; Spencer-Oatey, 2011, p.3576). “Rapport management” refers to the management or mismanagement of the above relations, including orientations of rapport enhancement, rapport maintenance, rapport neglect, rapport challenge, etc. (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

During the process of managing rapport, there are three key elements that influence people's dynamic perceptions of rapport: behavioral expectations, face sensitivities and interactional wants. Firstly, behavioral expectations refer to people's expectations developed based on their sociality rights and obligations that are related to two interactional principles. The equity principle refers to people's belief that they are entitled to personal consideration from others and to be treated fairly. The

association principle manifests people's belief that they should be associated with others in keeping with the type of relationship that they have with them (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.100). If the above expectations of equity and association are not satisfied, rapport may be damaged.

Secondly, in terms of face issues, it includes two types of "face," that is, respectability face and identity face. The former refers to the prestige and honor that a person or a social group holds. The latter is the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself regarding specific social attributes in specific social interactions, which is situation-specific and highly vulnerable (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.103) and is the face that may be enhanced or managed in the rapport management model (*ibid.*). Specifically, people's claims of their identity face are based on the positive social values that they associate with their various self-aspects, such as bodily features and control, possessions and belongings, performance/skills and so on (*ibid.*, p.104). If these sensitivities are challenged by criticism, people may perceive that their face is threatened. Conversely, if their sensitivities are ingratiated properly, people may feel that their identity face is enhanced (*ibid.*).

Thirdly, by interactional wants, the rapport framework emphasizes that people hold goals when they interact with others, and these "wants" can affect rapport judgments. These goals may be transactional and aim at accomplishing a specific task, or be relational and aim at developing certain types of relationships with others (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, p.107). More importantly, Spencer-Oatey and Frankin (2009) point out that interlocutors' mutual understanding of each other's interactional goals and their congruence are essential in intercultural interaction and rapport management. Hence, if interlocutors have not achieved their goals or they are not aware of the intents of each other, the interaction is more likely to fail and rapport may be damaged.

The Rapport Management Model is applicable to the present study, as this theory accounts for both politeness and impoliteness in language usage by offering three elements that can be used to analyze linguistic behaviors. In the current study, native Chinese speakers may use direct criticism more frequently in certain types of intimacy-power relationships and less often in other types. Such preferences can reflect how Chinese speakers consider the impacts of the rapport-threatening nature of criticism on face, sociality rights and obligations and interactional goals, implying the different rapport orientations that they may take in various contexts. Therefore, the current study was carried out by referring to the Rapport Management Model.

### *1.3.2. Rapport management in the use of criticism*

As one of the reflections of how interlocutors interpret their interpersonal relations, rapport has already been explored in the studies of criticism, since criticism is still frequently used in social interaction (Douglas, 2002) even when it may seriously damage the relationship between interlocutors.

From the perspective of addressees, Zhu (2014) explored the influences of strong disagreement, as a subtype of criticism in a broad sense, on listeners' perception of interpersonal rapport. Based on the analyses of Chinese students' discussions during English Corner, this study reveals that Chinese English learners use a relatively high percentage of strong disagreement in all types of agreements. However, due to factors such as soft intonation, shared interactional goals, as well as identities, the strong disagreements have not caused great damage to rapport and sometimes even

enhanced rapport. For instance, when the speakers and listeners are in a relationship with high solidarity, the listeners may treat the bald-on-record behavior with more toleration (Zhu, 2014, p.651). This tendency suggests that not all instances of criticism are rapport-damaging, but some may be rapport-maintaining or even rapport-enhancing when used in certain contexts.

Several studies also explore the relationship between rapport management and criticism in terms of how addressers use criticism in certain contexts. For instance, Tang (2016) compared the criticizing strategies used by the judges of American and Chinese TV shows. Generally, as for the overall instances of criticism (including direct and indirect criticism), Chinese and American judges use more direct criticism than indirect one (Chinese: 188 direct and 112 indirect; American: 226 direct and 74 indirect). However, Chinese judges used indirect criticism (37.33%) more often than American judges (24.67%). This is due to the influences of higher-context culture in China that greatly emphasizes group harmony and interpersonal relationships within the same social network (Tang, 2016, p.124).

Similarly, Lin (2020) explored rapport management based on 180 samples of criticism and praise used by American, England and Chinese judges in real TV shows. Results showed that Chinese judges used more instances of criticism (including direct and indirect criticism) than American and British judges due to their authoritarian identity which is typical in Chinese paternalistic culture (p.51). Also, American, British and Chinese judges all prefer direct criticism more than indirect criticism, which accords with Tang (2016)'s general findings. However, unlike Tang (2016), Lin (2020) shows that American judges used indirect criticism more often than Chinese judges. More specifically, in terms of the "Suggestion" strategy of indirect criticism, American judges used a higher percentage of "Suggestion" than Chinese and British judges (American: 21, accounting for 58.33%; Chinese: 27, accounting for 55.1%; British: 6, accounting for 30%). Hence it is revealed that American and Chinese judges were both concerned about the contestants by using indirect strategies to alleviate the destructive impact of their criticism, suggesting that American judges also show consideration for rapport. Such differences might be ascribed to the fact that the TV shows and sample sizes in these two studies are different and that Lin (2020) also focused on the compliments made by judges.

Taken together, the above studies have revealed a close and complex relationship between criticism and rapport, yet previous explorations on criticism and rapport still remain some problems to be solved. On the one hand, many studies focus on speakers' criticizing strategies to explore how speakers may manage rapport, while less studies have paid attention to reflecting speakers' awareness of rapport management through the perspective of interlocutors' intimacy-power relationships in the usage of criticism, especially in Chinese culture. Specifically, the speaker-listener relationship of different degrees of intimacy or relativities of power in Chinese society (see Section 1.2) can serve as a potential and important window for investigating the situation when speakers use criticism more frequently and when less frequently, which helps reflect their underlying motivations of managing rapport. On the other hand, the quantified data collected in previous studies mostly relied on scripted discourses (e.g., TV shows). Although such data may provide some evidence, these studies lack the utilization of large datasets and provide a relatively small size of data sample, which might negatively influence the generalizability of the findings or observations (Su & Fu, 2023).

Therefore, the above considerations require further studies to investigate the usage of criticism. Compared with previous literature, the current study, based on the quantified data collected from large datasets, further explores the intimacy-power patterns in the usage of direct criticism by native Chinese speakers and their awareness of rapport management when using criticism.

#### 1.4. The present study

This study aims to explore the intimacy-power relationships in the usage of Chinese direct criticism and how this can reflect native Chinese speakers' awareness of managing rapport. Also, since Chinese criticism often appears after certain criticizing markers such as “你这(*nizhe*)” (“You”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”), “你太(*nitai*)” (“You are so”) and so on (Peng, 2012; Fang, 2017; Shi, 2019), the current study also analyzes the usage of criticism with different criticizing markers (see Section 2.1). In particular, by employing the corpus analysis of criticism, this study aims to address the following questions.

- (i) What are the patterns of intimacy-power relationships when Chinese speakers use criticism?
- (ii) What are the patterns of intimacy-power relationships when Chinese speakers use criticism with different criticizing markers?
- (iii) What do the above intimacy-power relationship patterns reflect Chinese speakers' awareness of rapport management?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Corpus and data retrieval

The current study retrieved data from the BLCU Corpus Center (BCC) developed by Beijing Language and Culture University, which can be accessed freely at <http://bcc.blcu.edu.cn/>. BCC collects various types of discourses including but not limited to news, literature, technology discourses and online blog posts, amounting to tens of billions of characters. It is designed as a representative online system of modern Chinese serving for linguistic studies and language application, providing powerful retrieval functions. Hence as a support for language research, BCC could be used as a resource for investigating speech acts in Chinese, given that it provides relatively comprehensive linguistic evidence for Chinese criticism.

To retrieve the instances of Chinese direct criticism, this study searched in BCC with the keywords that represent the conventional markers frequently appearing in Chinese criticism. Based on previous studies on Chinese criticism (Peng, 2012; Fang, 2017; Shi, 2019), we identified 13 conventional criticizing markers in spoken Chinese and used them as well as their variants to search for instances of criticism in BCC. Drawing on the data taken from BCC, we initially retrieved 56,816 concordances. In order to select criticism occurring in face-to-face, dynamic and instantly interactive contexts, data sources that do not occur in an instant situated conversation between interlocutors (i.e., online blogs and news) were filtered. Finally, the database yielded a total of 32,976 concordances as raw data. The information on the markers used in the current study is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Criticizing markers in Chinese and their number of occurrences

No.	Marker	English translation	Raw
1	你这( <i>nizhe</i> ) + n./adj	You, ...	10,182
2	我看你( <i>wokanni</i> )	I think that you	6,435
3	你真是( <i>nizhenshi</i> )	You are such/so	5,719
4	你太( <i>nitai</i> )	You are so	3,373
5	你总是( <i>nizongshi</i> )	You always	1,865
6	你看你/你瞧你/你看看你 ( <i>nikanni/nijiaoni/nikankanni</i> )	Look at yourself	1,826
7	谁叫你( <i>shuijiaoni</i> )	Nobody tells you to	1,471
8	你可真( <i>nikezhen</i> )	You are so	1,088
9	你等着瞧( <i>nidengzheqiao</i> )	You should wait and see	317
10	你简直是( <i>nijianzhishi</i> )	You are... at all	285
11	敢情你( <i>ganqingni</i> )	So it is you...	164
12	好你个( <i>haonige</i> )	You are such a...	148
13	不是我说你( <i>bushi woshuoni</i> )	I'm not blaming you	103
	Total		32,976

## 2.2. Data selection

Based on the retrieved data, we selected the most appropriate instances of direct criticism by referring to the analyses of local grammar with regard to speech acts (Hunston & Sinclair, 2000; Su, 2017; Hunston & Su, 2019; Su & Fu, 2023). Local grammar is considered as an alternative approach to language description as opposed to general grammar, as it focuses on the pragmatic function of discourse by employing functional terminologies to describe language use associated with a specific discourse function (Su & Wei, 2018; Su & Fu, 2023). Specifically, to identify the necessary functional components in the speech act of criticism, we referred to the local grammar analyses of “the speech act of evaluation” (Hunston & Su, 2019) in the current study, as the nature of criticism is the negative evaluation made by the speakers towards the listeners (see the definition of criticism in Section 1.1). In Hunston and Su (2019), several functional items of evaluation are proposed, including “Evaluator,” “Target,” “Evaluation,” “Evaluative act,” “Hinge” and “Action”. Considering that the essence of criticism accords with the speech act of evaluation, we chose to adapt the functional terminologies of the speech act of evaluation to the current analyses of criticism. Hence based on our definition of direct criticism, qualified direct criticism should at least include the following four functional items: (i) Criticizer (corresponding to “Evaluator”); (ii) Criticized (corresponding to “Target”); (iii) Action (the same as “Action”); (iv) Direct negative evaluation (corresponding to “Evaluation”). Specifically, the “Criticizer” refers to the addresser of the criticism; the “Criticized” refers to the addressee of the criticism; the “Action” refers to the addressee’s choice/behavior that arouses the addresser’s negative attitudes; and the “Direct negative evaluation” refers to addresser’s negative evaluation that includes explicit negative words/phrases.

Based on the above criteria, we analyzed the 32,976 concordances in order to select appropriate data for analyses. Specifically, we selected one concordance to analyze in every five concordances. If the concordance contains the four functional items, it is selected as a qualified instance of the speech act of Chinese direct criticism; however, if the concordance does not contain any one of the items, it is deleted. This procedure continued until the selected concordances accounted for about 10% of the raw data.

Based on the above procedures, the current study finally selected 3,280 instances of direct criticism to be analyzed in the next section.

### 2.3. Data analysis

#### 2.3.1. Data coding

According to the research aim and research questions, this study identified the speaker-listener's degree of intimacy and the relativity of power from the perspective of speakers by using the information provided in the contexts. The coding processes were as follows.

Firstly, the dataset was assigned to four researchers who are native Chinese speakers and graduate students majoring in linguistics. These four researchers were divided into two groups to code the degree of intimacy and the relativity of power of the interlocutors in the concordances by referring to the contexts. As for the degree of intimacy, it was coded as "Close," "Ordinary" or "Distant" with regard to the degrees of relationship closeness between the addresser and the addressee. With regard to the relativity of power, it was coded as "High to Low" when the addresser's social status was higher than the addressee's, "Equal" for the situation when the interlocutors' social status was similar and "Low to High" when the addresser's social status was lower than the addressee's. If any one of the relationship features could not be clearly identified in the concordance, it would be excluded from analyses.

Secondly, to ensure the objectivity of the coding process, after each group had completed the coding task, they changed the coding results to find the concordances that yielded different coding results. As for these concordances with arguable coding results, we invited another five native Chinese speakers (all graduate students) to help identify the most appropriate coding. Based on the coding opinions of these Chinese speakers, only if more than two-thirds of the speakers agree on the coding, the concordance would finally be coded. If these nine native speakers could not reach an agreement in terms of some disputed concordances even after discussion, then these concordances would be deleted.

Finally, through the process outlined above, the analyses yielded 2,435 effective concordances with their corresponding intimacy-power relationships.

#### 2.3.2. Statistical analysis

Based on the above effective data, this study conducted two types of statistical analyses. On the one hand, the number of intimacy and power relationships was calculated and their overall patterns were presented to show the landscape of intimacy-power relationships in Chinese criticism. On the other hand, as for the criticizing markers with more than 200 effective concordances in the analyses, this study further analyzed their specific intimacy-power relationships, to find their potential uniqueness and differences.

## 3. Results

This section provides three types of data, including the respective distribution of intimacy and power relationships, the overall distribution of intimacy-power relationships, as well as the distribution of intimacy-power relationships in direct criticism with different criticizing markers.



**Table 2.** The number and proportion of intimacy-power relationships

Intimacy-power relationships	Type	Number of occurrences (%)
Degree of intimacy	Close	1,101 (45.22%)
	Ordinary	518 (21.27%)
	Distant	816 (33.51%)
	Total	2,435 (100%)
Relativity of power	High to low	412 (16.92%)
	Equal	1931 (79.30%)
	Low to high	92 (3.78%)
	Total	2,435 (100%)

### 3.1. The respective distribution of intimacy and power relationships

Table 2 presents the number and proportion of different types of intimacy degree and power relativity. In the current dataset, most of the addressers thought that they had close relationships with the addressees, accounting for nearly half of the data (45.22%), while the least addressers considered the addresser-addressee relationship as ordinary (21.27%). In terms of their power relativity, equal relationships accounted for a substantial proportion of the overall data (79.3%), while addressers seldom used direct criticism when their social status was lower than the addressee's (3.78%).

### 3.2. The distribution of intimacy-power relationships

This study further calculated the number and proportion of the nine intimacy-power relationship combinations (see Table 3), including “Close\*High-to-Low,” “Close\*Equal,” “Close\*Low-to-High,” “Ordinary\*High-to-Low,” “Ordinary\*Equal,” “Ordinary\*Low-to-High,” “Distant\*High-to-Low,” “Distant\*Equal” and “Distant\*Low-to-High.” Generally, “Close\*Equal” (876) accounted for the highest proportion in all the combinations (35.98%), followed by “Distant\*Equal” with 641 instances (26.33%). In addition, “Ordinary\*Low-to-High” accounted for the least of the data with only 17 examples (0.7%).

### 3.3. The distribution of intimacy-power relationships in different criticizing markers

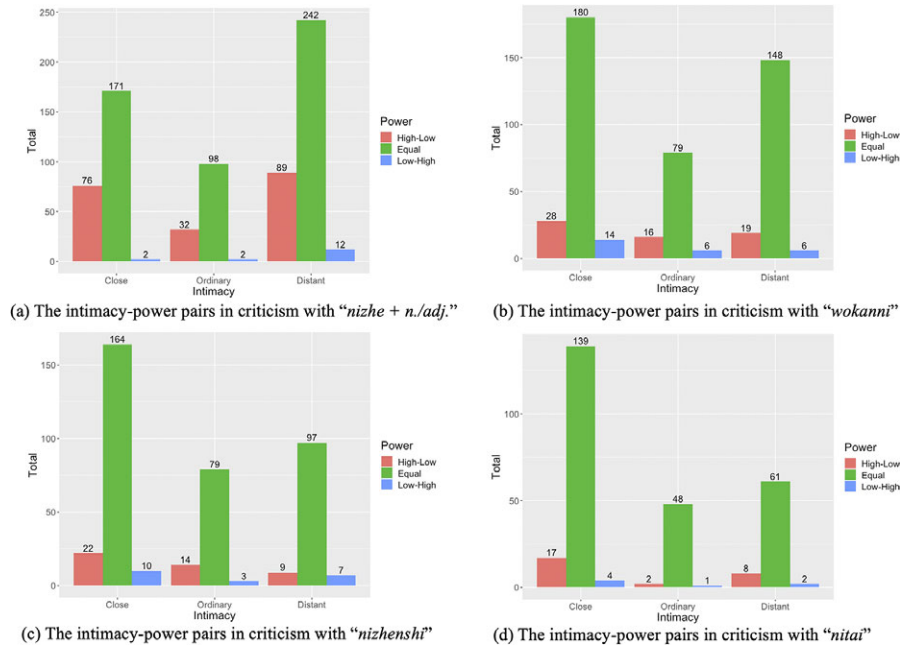
The current study identified four criticizing markers with more than 200 effective concordances, including “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)”

**Table 3.** The number and proportion of intimacy-power relationships

Intimacy-power relationships	Number of occurrences (%)
Close*high-low	181(7.43%)
Close*equal	876 (35.98%)
Close*low-high	44 (1.81%)
Ordinary*high-low	87 (3.57%)
Ordinary*equal	414 (17.00%)
Ordinary*low-high	17 (0.70%)
Distant*high-low	144 (5.91%)
Distant*equal	641 (26.33%)
Distant*low-high	31 (1.27%)
Total	2,435 (100%)

**Table 4.** The number and proportion of intimacy-power relationships in the direct criticism with different markers

Intimacy-power relationships	Markers with more than 200 effective concordances			
	你这( <i>nizhe</i> ) + n./adj. (You + n./adj.)	我看你 ( <i>wokanni</i> ) (I think that you)	你真是( <i>nizhenshi</i> ) (You are such/so)	你太( <i>nitai</i> ) + adj. (You are so + adj.)
Close*high-to-low	76 (10.49%)	28 (5.64%)	22 (5.43%)	17 (6.03%)
Close*equal	171 (23.62%)	180 (36.29%)	164 (40.49%)	139 (49.29%)
Close*low-to-high	2 (0.28%)	14 (2.82%)	10 (2.47%)	4 (1.42%)
Ordinary*high-to-low	32 (4.42%)	16 (3.23%)	14 (3.46%)	2 (0.71%)
Ordinary*equal	98 (13.53%)	79 (15.93%)	79 (19.51%)	48 (17.02%)
Ordinary*low-to-high	2 (0.28%)	6 (1.21%)	3 (0.74%)	1 (0.35%)
Distant*high-to-low	89 (12.29%)	19 (3.83%)	9 (2.22%)	8 (2.84%)
Distant*equal	242 (33.43%)	148 (29.84%)	97 (23.95%)	61 (21.63%)
Distant*low-to-high	12 (1.66%)	6 (1.21%)	7 (1.73%)	2 (0.71%)
Total	724 (100%)	496 (100%)	405 (100%)	282 (100%)



**Figure 1.** The patterns of intimacy-power relationships in direct criticism with **four different** markers. (a) The number of occurrences of different intimacy-power pairs in criticism with the marker “*nizhe* + n./adj.”; (b) The number of occurrences of different intimacy-power pairs in criticism with the marker “*wokanni*”; (c) The number of occurrences of different intimacy-power pairs in criticism with the marker “*nizhenshi*”; (d) The number of occurrences of different intimacy-power pairs in criticism with the marker “*nitai*.”

(“I think that you”), “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”) and “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”). Table 4 and Figure 1 show the number of different intimacy-power relationships in the direct criticism with these four markers. Generally, similar to the overall pattern presented in Section 3.2, the highly frequent relationship

combinations were “Close\*Equal” and “Distant\*Equal,” while “Ordinary\*Low-High” accounted for the least proportion. In addition, differences existed among these markers.

Notably, the most frequently appearing relationship combination differed among these criticizing markers. As for “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”), “Distant\*Equal” accounted for the majority of the instances. However, in criticism with markers of “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”), “Close\*Equal” accounted for the highest percentage. Furthermore, the least frequently appearing relationship combination also manifested uniqueness across these markers. Specifically, in all four markers, “Ordinary\*Low-to-High” showed extremely low frequency consistently; however, data also indicated that some relationship combinations appeared less in criticism with certain criticizing markers. For instance, as for “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”), there was the rare possibility that the relationship was “Close\*Low-to-High”. In addition, in “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”), “Distant\*Low-to-High” accounted for the same proportion as “Ordinary\*Low-to-High”. Finally, “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”) was scarcely used when the relationship was “Ordinary\*High-to-Low” or “Distant\*Low-to-High”.

In conclusion, the current analyses revealed that Chinese speakers were more likely to use direct criticism in close equal and distant equal relationships, but differences existed in the direct criticism with various criticizing markers.

## 4. Discussion

With the data retrieved from a large corpus, this study explored the patterns of intimacy-power relationships in the usage of Chinese direct criticism and how such patterns may reflect native Chinese speakers’ rapport management. Results revealed that native Chinese speakers use direct criticism more often in close and equal as well as distant and equal relationships, which also manifested differences in various types of criticizing markers. Such preferences and tendencies of using criticism in certain intimacy-power relationships imply speakers’ considerations towards rapport management.

### 4.1. The usage of direct criticism in different intimacy-power relationships

#### 4.1.1. Frequent usage of direct criticism in close and equal relationships

According to the results of corpus studies, the overall pattern reveals that close and equal relationships are the most frequent relationships in the current dataset. In terms of the degree of intimacy, native Chinese speakers use the most direct criticism in close relationships, and they are more likely to use direct criticism when the addressees are in close and distant relationships with them than in ordinary relationships. It accords with Zhu (2005)’s findings that when the interlocutors’ relationship is in the most extreme situation, that is, intimate or totally strange, it is more free for Chinese speakers to criticize others casually (p.77). It can be ascribed to the fact that Chinese culture is relation-based, leading to Chinese people’s adoration of interpersonal intimacy (Martin & Nakayama, 2018) and their conceptualization of solidarity that tolerates direct bald-on-record behavior (Lee-Wong, 1994; Zhu, 2014). In particular, when the addresser–addressee relationship is close, they are aware of

their mutual background information and interactional intention, which leads to the use of direct criticism instead of a polite formula. Alternatively, when the interlocutors are in a distant relationship, addressers will be less likely to consider the face issue of the addressees since they will no longer keep further social interactions, and thus may also criticize the addressees directly. However, when the relationship is at the middle of the continuum, the addressers and addressees are acquaintances but not close friends or total strangers, they should take the face-threatening and relationship-challenging nature of criticism into account, which may result in the cautious utilization of direct criticism. In addition, familiarity also plays a role in the above process. As for close and distant acquaintances, addressers are totally familiar or unfamiliar with addressees, which means that it is not extremely necessary for addressers to take care of the face concerns of addressees, leading to the use of direct criticism in a relatively free way. Conversely, interlocutors with ordinary relationships know each other but are not very familiar with each other, which points to the necessity of saving the face of addressees and limits the use of direct criticism.

With regard to the relativity of power, the results uncover that when the addressers and addressees are of equal status, the addressers use more direct criticism in situations when they are unequal, and that higher-status addressers use more direct criticism to lower-status addressees than *vice versa*. This pattern of power relationship indicates that the speech acts of criticism are related to the sociality rights of interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, 2011). Specifically, equal status presupposes that the addresser are entitled to criticize the addressee and *vice versa*, leading to the frequent appearance of equal relationship in the usage of direct criticism in the current dataset. On the other hand, the sporadic occurrences of the “low to high” relationship in the usage of direct criticism manifest the significance of the order of rank and superiority in China (Zhu, 2005). Due to the constraint of social hierarchy, people of higher status are more legitimate to criticize people of lower status than *vice versa*, since the social rank endows them with the priority in rights. In this way, if addressers of lower status use criticism directly towards addressees of a higher social status, it may result in a breakdown of communication to a large extent, which may cause extremely negative consequences for the addressers. Also, in dynamic interaction, when the power relativity changes in the context, the usage of criticism will also vary according to the variation of power dynamics. For example, when a superior leader is demoted and becomes a subordinate staff, he/she will take the position of the lower status and use criticism carefully, especially when interacting with the higher status.

Therefore, generally, close and equal relationships appear more frequently in the usage of Chinese direct criticism than other types of relationship combinations, which may show its positive function of reducing the potential negative influences caused by direct criticism. In particular, when interlocutors are in a close and equal relationship, the addresser is prone to be aware of the possibility that the addressee can interpret his/her real intention of criticizing instead of regarding the criticism as maliciousness, and thus the speaker-listener rapport is less likely to be challenged. In addition, in a close and equal relationship, the speaker and the listener are more likely to assume that the other has the right to criticize them and that it may be reasonable for them to accept the criticism. Finally, although the damage to the listener's face caused by criticism is inevitable, as discussed before, Chinese people's tolerance of solidarity and intimacy may function as a buffer to decrease such negative impacts (Lee-Wong, 1994; Zhu, 2014; Weng et al., 2023). Hence based on the manipulation of

face, sociality right and communication intention, the choice of using direct criticism in close and equal relationships manifests Chinese speakers' awareness of rapport management, whereas the passive aspects of direct criticism may be toned down in such relationships.

#### 4.1.2. *The use of different criticizing markers in different intimacy-power relationships*

In terms of the criticizing markers in Chinese direct criticism, the current dataset reveals that Chinese speakers use “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”) more often in close and equal relationships, while using “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”) more frequently in distant and equal relationships.

As for the utilization of “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”), it can be ascribed to the communicative intention shared by interlocutors in close and equal relationships. Specifically in Chinese, when native speakers use direct criticism with the markers of “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”), they not only express their negative evaluation but also convey their solicitude to the listener in certain contexts. The intrinsic speaker intention underlying such negative evaluation is that the speaker hopes that the listener could change their behavior or choice for the listener's sake. As the interlocutors share high common ground, it is more confident for the speaker to assume that the listener can understand his/her benign intention and his/her sociality right and obligation to express their consideration through criticism. This may lead to the speaker's assumption that the usage of such criticizing markers in close and equal relationship may not result in damaged rapport. Hence, it explains why speakers use these markers more freely in close and equal relationships.

Moreover, some markers in this group, particularly for “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”), have already presupposed the existence of close relationships in its pragmatic contexts. In “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) that corresponds to “In my opinion, you...” in English, the co-occurrence of “我(I)” and “你(you)” manifests itself as indicating the potential relationship between the addresser and addressee, as the closeness between the linguistic symbols of “我(I)” and “你(you)” shows that the two are also iconically close in the real world according to the principle of “Iconicity of Distance”(Croft, 2008). Therefore, when using this criticizing marker, the speakers have a clear conception that they are familiar with each other and that the usage of such criticizing markers would not lead to the breakdown of rapport.

In terms of the marker “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”), though it also appears in close and equal relationships, it appears more frequently in distant and equal relationships. On the one hand, it is probably due to the property of “你这(*nizhe*)” (“You+ n./adj.”), as it is less likely for this marker to convey the above extra interpersonal meaning in Chinese, but to directly convey the speaker's negative attitudes. Correspondingly, as for interlocutors in distant relationships, there is no incentive for the speaker to convey extra kindness in direct criticism but to convey negative attitudes straightforwardly. On the other hand, when the relationship is distant and equal, there is also no obvious necessity for the speaker to save the face of the listener in direct criticism, as they will not keep in touch in the future. Hence the usage of direct criticism with “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” (“You+ n./adj.”) reflects that the speaker may adopt a rapport-damaging or rapport-ignoring orientation in

interaction, with less efforts made to decrease the potential damage of criticism or to maintain/enhance rapport. Therefore, Chinese speakers use different criticizing markers when facing various intimacy-power relationships. Such choices of criticizing markers also imply their awareness of rapport management in various contexts of using direct criticism.

Taken together, the above discussions on direct criticism as well as criticizing markers show that native Chinese speakers are aware of the rapport-threatening nature of criticism and thus adopt rapport-maintaining/rapport-enhancing orientations by using the majority of criticism in close and equal relationships, whereas they may also ignore rapport management especially when the speaker-listener relationship is distant and equal.

#### 4.2. *The revisiting of Rapport Management Theory in analyzing Chinese direct criticism*

Based on the Rapport Management Theory, this study reveals that speakers are more likely to use direct criticism in close and equal relationships, showing their awareness of rapport management and demonstrating the applicability of the rapport framework. Firstly, in terms of the rapport element “face”, Chinese speakers choose to criticize the addressees in close relationship more frequently by using certain markers, including “你太(*nitai*) + adj.” (“You are so + adj.”), “我看你(*wokanni*)” (“I think that you”) and “你真是(*nizhenshi*)” (“You are such/so”), due to the fact that the usage of direct criticism between intimate acquaintances may be less likely to threaten the listeners’ face. However, as for some direct criticism (e.g., criticism with the marker “你这(*nizhe*) + n./adj.” [“You+ n./adj.”]) in which distant and equal relationship appears more frequently, it is unnecessary for speakers to consider the face need of the listener because they will not have future social interaction. Secondly, as for the element of “sociality and rights”, in a close and equal relationship, speakers may take it as their legitimate rights to express their attitudes towards the listeners as well as acquiesce in listeners’ consensus of understanding such sociality rights and obligations due to their shared high common ground, which leads to the use of direct criticism. Thirdly, as for the function of shared communicative goals (Spencer-Oatey & Frankin, 2009), close and equal relationships guarantee shared intention to a larger degree than any other relationships, which means that listeners are more likely to understand why the speakers use direct criticism (e.g., whether the criticism is malicious or for the listeners’ sake). Hence even if the direct criticism may threaten interpersonal rapport, Chinese speakers still use it because the listeners can interpret their real intentions instead of considering the criticism as a purely negative attack. Taken together, the current study shows the applicability of the Rapport Management Theory in analyzing the speech acts of criticism.

In addition, the current study also expands the Rapport Management Theory in terms of providing a new window for exploring rapport. Specifically, the analysis of intimacy-power relationships in Chinese direct criticism shows that it is plausible of using the patterns of intimacy-power relationships to get a glimpse of how speakers may manage rapport in communication. Hence, the exploration of the intimacy-power patterns may be regarded as a way to enrich rapport management studies.

More importantly, the current study also indicates that the studies of the interaction of speech act and rapport management are culture-involved. On the one hand, although the Rapport Management Theory is regarded as a general framework that can be used in most cultural contexts, the findings of the current study point to the

necessity of emphasizing cultural-specific analyses in rapport studies (e.g., the rapport management in the Chinese culture). Hence, the Rapport Management Theory should be further specified in terms of different socio-cultural frameworks. On the other hand, the speech act is performed in certain socio-cultural contexts, and the socio-pragmatic rules or norms governing the appropriate enactment of any given speech act vary greatly among cultures and languages (DeCapua & Dunham, 2007, p.139). Hence, not only the Rapport Management Theory but also the theories of speech act should consider the role of the socio-cultural environment within which the speech act is performed.

In conclusion, the current study provides insights into the Rapport Management Theory. It shows the plausibility of this theory and provides a new perspective on exploring rapport management in speech act studies, as well as emphasizes the cultural concerns in theories of rapport and speech act.

#### 4.3. Pedagogical applications

Pragmatic competence, as part of communicative competence, is important for L2 teaching and learning. As indicated by Ren (2022), pragmatic competence is teachable and pragmatic instruction is useful (Su & Fu, 2023), and in L2 pragmatic competence, what needs to be done is to explore how to teach L2 pragmatic competence (Ren, 2022). As an important component of pragmatic competence, the teaching of speech acts also faces a similar challenge of how to teach students the appropriate usage of speech acts in a certain language by developing students' repertoire of language resources.

According to Su and Fu (2023), the teaching of speech act points to the need to systematically document and describe speech act realizations (p.54), and the current study provides the description of the speech act of criticism from the perspective of the interpersonal relationship between interlocutors. This offers both teachers and learners an inventory of pragmatic resources for performing criticism. On the one hand, the patterns of intimacy-power relationships show the circumstances when Chinese criticism is more likely or less likely to be performed. The frequency of each type of relationship represents the most and least conventional interpersonal contexts in which criticism is used. Following the results of the current study, teachers are able to provide students with the quantified pattern of speech act usage. On the other hand, the exploration of criticizing markers can also be used as a resource for second language teaching. The most frequently used markers and the relationships presented in these criticizing markers not only manifest the internal differences of criticism but also serve as authentic examples of Chinese criticism in pedagogical practices.

Therefore, the exploration of the intimacy-power relationships in the speech act of criticism can facilitate the cultivation of pragmatic competence for both L2 Chinese teachers and learners.

#### 4.4. Limitations and implications

As discussed above, the current study uses instances from the corpus to analyze the patterns of intimacy-power relationships in Chinese direct criticism and its reflection on native Chinese speakers' rapport management. However, there still remain several topics for future exploration.

On the one hand, the current study only focuses on direct criticism in Chinese, and it requires further within-language explorations and cross-language comparisons in terms of criticism. As for within-language studies, other aspects such as gender groups, religion and education, deserve further examination on their interactions with the usage of criticism in future studies. Also, the differences in rapport management between the usage of Chinese direct and indirect criticism should be clearly identified in future studies. As for cross-language studies, comparisons and contrasts between the same speech acts in different languages and sub-cultural groups are needed, such as the differences in using criticism between Chinese and English speakers, and the patterns of using criticism among different Chinese or English minorities.

On the other hand, although the current study based its analyses on large corpus data, there is space for enlarging the dataset and expanding the scope of data type. Hence future studies should continue to increase the number of selected data in order to obtain richer information and avoid information loss. In addition, data retrieved from real speakers and listeners is required. Specifically, further studies using techniques such as self-paced reading, eye-tracking, event-related potentials (ERP) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) can be used to obtain various types of data in terms of the interpretation and usage of criticism. For example, ERP is able to record interlocutors' brain activities that may reflect their neurological processing when they are choosing criticizing strategies.

## 5. Conclusion

This study extends the past literature on the speech act of criticism and rapport management by highlighting the patterns of intimacy-power relationships in the usage of Chinese direct criticism. Based on current evidence, our data reveal that close and equal relationships are the most prevalent relationships in the usage of Chinese direct criticism; moreover, different criticizing markers also manifest unique relationship patterns. Generally, taking Chinese direct criticism as an example, the results support the plausibility of Rapport Management Theory by showing that speakers adopt rapport-maintaining/rapport-enhancing orientations by using the majority of direct criticism in close and equal relationships and that they may ignore rapport especially in distant and equal relationships. It may indicate that the intimacy-power relationships might be one of the basic motivations in the utilization of the speech act of criticism. To conclude, this study provides insights into our understanding of the speech act of criticism, especially into the intimacy-power relationships and its reflection of rapport management.

**Data availability statement.** The dataset will be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Funding statement.** This work was supported by the Key Program of the National Social Science Fund of China [grant number 19AYY011]; and the 2023 Research Project "World Languages and Culture Studies" of China Center for Language Planning and Policy Studies [grant number WYZL2023SH0019].

**Ethical statement.** This article does not contain any studies with human participants.

**Competing interest.** The author(s) declare none.



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**Cite this article:** Weng, X., & Liao, Q. (2025). The intimacy-power relationships in the usage of direct criticism in Chinese: a reflection of rapport management, *Language and Cognition*, 17, e3, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1017/langcog.2024.69>