

Article

Communication Strategies for Building and Maintaining Collaborative Relations: A Sino-American Case Study of Rapport and 'Politeness'

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to examine the communication strategies used to build and maintain collaborative relations: to identify which strategies were perceived to be rapport-enhancing, which were perceived to be rapport-undermining, and how participants responded to the latter in order to maintain rapport. The data for the study were collected during a three-week visit to the USA by a delegation of senior Chinese government officials who wanted to enhance their links and positive relations with their counterpart organisation in the USA. Various types of data were collected, the main ones being video/audio recordings of the official meetings and metapragmatic comments made by the Chinese delegates at daily evening meetings when they discussed their day-time experiences. It was found that the delegates were extremely conscious of any progress or undermining of their key goal for the visit, regularly commenting on this. They were very appreciative of the US hosts' relaxed interaction style and for the ways in which they built common ground. Their main complaints related to the interpreter's behaviour. The findings are discussed in relation to pragmatic research into (im)politeness, rapport management and the impact of context. Delegates seemed unaware of possible differences in interlocutors' normative expectations associated with communicative events, especially speaking procedures and role responsibilities. The article ends by making some professional development recommendations in relation to this.

Keywords: communication strategies; pragmatics; rapport; politeness; offence; intercultural

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted within pragmatics that language has two main components and functions (e.g., Brown & Yule, 1983; Watzlawick et al., 1967): a content component with a transactional function and an interpersonal component with a relationship management function. In this article we focus on the interpersonal component and consider how language is used to manage or mismanage relationships. We do this by drawing on case study data involving a high-level Chinese delegation visit to the USA which had as one of its key goals the enhancement of collaborative relations with their counterpart organisation in the USA.

We maintain that it is important for applied linguists to conduct applied research of this kind in order to offer

valuable insights for professionals seeking and/or needing to build positive working relationships, both internationally and domestically. A recent LinkedIn study of the fastest growing skills in the UK (LinkedIn, 2025) identified relationship building as the most widely needed skill in the workplace and communication as the fourth. We believe that insights from applied linguistic research, and from interpersonal pragmatics in particular, can make a major contribution to this practical professional need.

Our aim with this article is to investigate how concepts and frameworks from pragmatics, (im)politeness theory, and rapport management can reveal insights into the communication strategies that can enhance or undermine collaborative relations. We draw attention to the contextual factors that can influence participants'



judgements, especially normative expectations associated with communicative events, along with the potential impact of different conceptions of the role responsibilities of the various participants. We maintain that analysing met-pragmatic comments in combination with discourse data enriches the insights significantly.

2. Literature Review

Relationship management has been very extensively studied within pragmatics. It has been variously named as (im)politeness theory, interpersonal pragmatics, and rapport management. Here we use the term rapport management but draw on research within all these strands.

2.1. Rapport Management Strategies

Spencer-Oatey (2008, p. 12) defined rapport management as “the way language is used to construct, maintain and/or threaten social relationships” and identified four rapport management orientations (p. 32):

- Rapport enhancement orientation: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between the interlocutors;
- Rapport maintenance orientation: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors;
- Rapport neglect orientation: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self);
- Rapport challenge orientation: a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors.

In this paper, we focus on the first two orientations. We start by reviewing rapport maintenance, since much of the early work in pragmatics focused on this.

2.1.1. Rapport Maintenance Strategies

Early researchers in pragmatics were very interested in the ways that language was (or could be) used to avoid aggression and confrontation (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Lakoff, 1973) and to maintain friendly, cooperative relationships (e.g., Ide, 1989; Leech, 1983). The theorists argued that certain speech acts, such as requests, disagreement, or complaints, could cause offence to the interlocutor by imposing on their freedom and/or by threatening their face and therefore needed to be handled carefully (e.g., Boxer, 1993; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Pomerantz, 1984). The focus was on the linguistic strategies that speakers could choose and the aim was to maintain rapport through preventative action by paying close attention to wording, especially levels of directness. Many researchers agreed at the time that greater politeness was associated with greater indirectness, and in Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness, the ‘safest’ choice was to

avoid performing the potentially offensive speech act altogether.

Of course, when someone needs to respond to a speech act, such as a compliment or a request, avoidance is not normally an option. So, complementary research investigated different ways of responding politely to speech acts such as compliments (e.g., Chen, 1993) or strategies for politely declining an invitation or request (e.g., Kinjo, 1987).

In the early 2000s, a ‘relational turn’ (Kádár & Haugh, 2013) took place and attention shifted away from politeness to impoliteness and the broader concept of relational work. Locher and Watts (2005, p. 9) explain it as follows:

We propose that relational work, the ‘work’ individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others, which includes impolite as well as polite or merely appropriate behaviour, is a useful concept to help investigate the discursive struggle over politeness.

This ‘relational turn’ was accompanied by a move to examine longer stretches of discourse rather than isolated speech acts and it led to a large number of studies (e.g., Günthner, 2008; Haugh & Watanabe, 2009) that analysed the dynamic unfolding of interaction and the discursive struggle that interlocutors engage in. In this discourse-oriented research, the focus was very much on the language used to co-construct and negotiate relationships. However, Eelen (2001) drew attention to the crucial role that evaluation plays in (im)politeness. Since then, various scholars have acknowledged the importance of evaluation, but as both Haugh (2013) and Davies (2018) have pointed out, there has been surprisingly little research into it, especially until recently (but see, e.g., Haugh & Chang, 2019; Spencer-Oatey & McConachy, 2024; Spencer-Oatey & Wang, 2025).

Evaluation, of course, introduces a cognitive element—how interlocutors assess the politeness of what has been said and done, and on what bases. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021, p. 199) propose that interlocutors are likely to engage in several cognitive steps when they encounter some kind of problematic interaction and identify the following:

- (1) Reactive assessment: Evaluation of the offence for its seriousness, how far the other person is aware of the issue; who is responsible for it and/or takes responsibility for it.
- (2) Select response options: Decide whether to apologise, contest fault, talk through the issue, or ignore what happened.
- (3) Deal with the consequences: whether the issue is dropped/forgotten/forgiven, whether it influences subsequent interactions, or whether conflict ensues and rapport damaged.

These steps may take place exceedingly quickly and with little conscious awareness, or they may occur much more slowly and with conscious attention. However, little research has followed up on this aspect. A key issue is how we can know what evaluative judgements the interlocutors are making (i.e., their reactive assessments), if they choose not to verbalise them. We argue that the analysis of complementary metapragmatic comments can help address this problem.

2.1.2. Rapport Enhancement Orientation

So far, our focus has been on communication that is (potentially) relationally problematic, but there is increasing awareness that this needs to be complemented by solution-oriented research. This is exactly what a rapport enhancement orientation offers and so we turn to that now.

Although Brown and Levinson’s (1987) focus was on face-threatening acts, they identified a large number of ‘positive politeness’ strategies which they pointed out were not limited to use as redressive action. Other studies have examined a range of different strategies, including humour (e.g., Holmes & Marra, 2002), self-disclosure (e.g., Marsden, 2020), small talk (e.g., Crawford et al., 2017) and the building of common ground (e.g., Spencer-Oatey &

Xing, 1998). Often multiple strategies are used simultaneously (Crawford et al., 2017).

In addition, a significant amount of research into rapport enhancement strategies has been carried out in other fields. Two major areas are positive communication (Mickel, 2024; Mirivel, 2014; Mirivel & Lyon, 2023) and interpersonal psychology (Alison et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2013). Research within positive communication explores relationship building in everyday life and in the workplace, while a major strand of work within interpersonal psychology focuses on rapport building in interrogative interviewing.

Table 1 provides a list of strategies identified by key authors from these fields who have identified multiple strategies. As can be seen from the table, there are quite a number of overlaps as well as differences. Some of the main overlaps, shown with shading in Table 1, are as follows:

- Greet/establish contact
- Find common ground (e.g., in interests, experiences), such as through showing curiosity and asking questions
- Show concern/kindness/respect
- Pay compliments
- Joke

Table 1. Rapport-enhancement strategies identified in previous research (main overlaps shown with shading).

Applied Linguistics/Pragmatics		Positive Communication		Interrogative Interviewing
(Brown & Levinson, 1987)	(Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 1998)	(Mirivel, 2014; Mirivel & Lyon, 2023)	(Mickel, 2024)	(Kelly et al., 2013)
Convey other is interesting/admirable	Establish contact	Greet—create contact	Show respect	Find common ground/shared experiences
• Attend to other’s interests/needs	• Carry out familiarity checks	Ask—discover the unknown	Have empathy	Show kindness & respect
• Exaggerate interest/approval	• Greet	Compliment—build other’s sense of self	Take necessary action	Identify & meet basic needs
Claim in-group membership—use in-group identity markers	Show concern/interest	Disclose—deepen relationships	Advance a shared vision	Be patient
Claim common interests/opinions	• Ask social questions	Encourage—give support	Be generous	Allow source to play role of teacher
	• Make caring comments	Listen—transcend separateness	Display curiosity	Build a bond
• Seek agreement	Discuss inter-participant relationships	Inspire—influence others	Be vocal (share knowledge & experience)	Present self in different role
• Avoid disagreement			Stay positive	Touch other in friendly manner
• Presuppose common ground	• Attribute value		Empower others	Find identities in common
• Joke	• Pay compliment		Believe in the power of collaboration	Attempt to become source’s lifeline
Presuppose knowledge of & concern for other’s wants	• Refer to future contact		Demonstrate humility	Make yourself similar to other
Claim reflexivity	Claim common ground		Model vulnerability	Show concern for other and his/her situation
• Offer, promise	• Display shared knowledge/experiences		Embrace uncertainty	Use similar language to other (e.g., slang)
• Be optimistic	• Mention shared relationships		Act ethically	Employ active listening
• Include other in activity	• State assumptions/beliefs		Remain resilient	
• Give or ask for reasons				
Claim reciprocity—assume or assert reciprocity	Joke			

Some of the differences could be due to the data collection methods used. For example, Brown and Levinson (1987) drew on ‘observations of language use across cultures’; Spencer-Oatey and Xing (1998) analysed video recordings of a Sino-UK business visit; Mirivel (Mirivel, 2014; Mirivel & Lyon, 2023) synthesises work in positive communication; Mickel (2024) conducted a survey with open-ended questions on collaboration, especially at work; and Kelly et al. (2013) developed their taxonomy from the published literature in their field and related areas. In our study, we use yet another data source, meta-pragmatic comments on recent interactions.

Probably an even more influential factor is the contexts of the studies, so we discuss that next.

2.2. The Importance of the Setting(s)

A core pragmatic principle is that language use and its interpretation is influenced by contextual factors. These include the participants and their relationship and the setting(s) in which the interaction takes place (for an overview, see Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021, Chapter 5).

In terms of settings, various authors (e.g., Holmes et al., 2012; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013) have pointed out that settings operate at multiple levels, ranging from the immediate to the broad. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2013), for example, refer to four levels:

- Micro level: the elements associated with a specific interaction
- Meso level: features of the local context, such as the workplace or neighbourhood in which the interaction takes place
- Exo level: characteristics of the larger institutional setting, such as an education system or health care system
- Macro level: broad sociocultural characteristics, including world views, values and ideologies

At the micro level, the concept of communicative events is particularly helpful. It is labelled slightly differently by different scholars (e.g., Allwood, 2000, 2007; Levinson, 1979; Saville-Troike, 1997), but all refer to a type of communicative interaction that has a specific purpose, along with (a) conventions for carrying out that purpose and (b) participants who fulfil specific roles in doing so, often with the support of specific artifacts.

Allwood (2000, 2007) provides a very helpful characterisation of communicative events that is particularly useful for analysing communication when people are from diverse backgrounds. Table 2 summarises his interpretation.

A key feature of communicative events is that norms become associated with them, and participants develop expectations that these norms will be upheld. This means that if people hold different norms, because of differences in their micro-, meso-, exo- and/or macro-level

socialisation, they may experience a reaction (either positive or negative) to any breaches. In other words, one way in which culture can manifest itself is through the norms that participants hold. We argue that they can be particularly influential at the micro-level; in other words, through participants’ conceptions of expected and unexpected behaviour regarding the communicative events they participate in.

Table 2. Parameters for analysing communicative events (slightly adapted from Allwood, 2000, 2007).

Parameter	Explanation
Purpose	The purpose and function of the activity
Procedures	The procedures for carrying out the activity
Roles	The participant roles associated with the activity
Artifacts/tools	The instruments/tools/media used in carrying out the activity
Environment	The physical and social environment in which the activity takes place

2.3. Participant Relations and Role Responsibilities

Participant relations—whether interlocutors are equal or unequal, close or distant—are recognised as key influential contextual factors in pragmatics. An additional aspect is participants’ role rights and obligations and, as can be seen from Table 2, this is closely connected with communicative events and people’s expectations about who will say or do what and when.

Conceptions of role responsibilities are acquired through socialisation, as with other aspects of communicative events. So, this means that if participants have different conceptions of a particular role, problems may arise. One important role in our study is that of interpreter, so we consider here some background information on the role of interpreters.

Mason and Ren (2012, p. 235) point out that the role of the interpreter has traditionally been viewed as follows:

... it has been the traditional and persistent view that interpreters should be transparent, invisible, passive, neutral, and detached. They should do no more than make a faithful and accurate language switch and are not entitled to intervene in the communication process; they should just translate and they should translate everything; an ideal interpreter should not make people feel his/her presence.

Many national codes of practice uphold this viewpoint, yet there are occasions when these prescriptions need to be modified. For example, both the California Healthcare Interpreting Association (2002) and the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (2016) acknowledge that there are important occasions when this conduit view of interpreters needs to be changed. The National Register of Public Service Interpreters (2016, p.

6), for instance, notes that interpreters can interrupt, pause or intervene under the following circumstances:

- to ask for clarification;
- to point out that one party may not have understood something which the interpreter has good reason to believe has been assumed by the other party;
- to alert the parties to a possible missed cultural reference or inference; or
- to signal a condition or factor which might impair the interpreting process (such as inadequate seating, poor sight-lines or audibility, inadequate breaks etc.).

Moreover, Mapson and Major (2021) point out that discourse-focused studies reveal that interpreters are ratified participants who co-construct the unfolding interaction. Research (e.g., Theys et al., 2020) has also shown that this can lead to problems of rapport if the clients believe that the interpreter should simply be a message converter.

2.4. Rapport Management Strategies—The Research Gap

Many of the studies that have examined the use of rapport management strategies have either just analysed the discourse or have conducted surveys. The problem with analysing the discourse only is that we cannot always be sure of the participants' evaluative reactions, especially if they prefer to conceal their emotions and reactions. It runs the risk of either failing to identify interactions that were salient (positively or negatively) to one or more of the participants, or else of identifying something as positively or negatively salient, on the basis of (presumed cultural) difference, but which the participants did not necessarily perceive in this way.

Some researchers have interviewed the participants shortly after a communicative event (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2008, 2019), which helps address this problem, but may also run the risk of the interviewer's questions influencing the interviewees' responses, since interviews inevitably involve co-construction (Mann, 2011).

Survey studies can provide normative viewpoints but typically lack detailed contextualisation of the interactions and the respondents rarely have any emotional/motivational involvement with the interactions. This limits the strength and applicability of their findings.

As will be explained in the next section, we had a unique opportunity to overcome these limitations by being able to obtain both discourse data and spontaneous post-event metapragmatic comments.

We explored the following research questions in analysing our data:

RQ1: What communication strategies were perceived by the Chinese delegates as rapport-enhancing?

RQ2: What communication strategies were perceived by the Chinese delegates as rapport-undermining?

RQ3: What communication strategies were used by the Chinese delegates to help manage (potentially) rapport-undermining interactions?

3. Methodology

The data used in this study come from a three-week delegation visit to the United States of America by some senior Chinese government officials. The purpose of the visit was to exchange information and ideas and to strengthen their longstanding relationship.

3.1. The Participants

The delegation comprised twenty senior Chinese officials from a government ministry, including a head of delegation (HoD) and a deputy HoD. They were accompanied by a delegation administrator/organiser, who was also a field researcher. Everyone knew each other well, but only the field researcher was fluent in English.

The delegation visited various different US organisations, all associated with their ministry's field of work, so both US and Chinese participants had similar professional backgrounds. The US hosts hired an interpreter to provide two-way interpretation for the whole trip. She was ethnically Chinese, fluent in Mandarin Chinese, but born and raised in the USA.

All participants' names, their organisations and the locations of the visits have been anonymised for confidentiality reasons.

3.2. Data Collection

All meetings and key events were video/audio recorded (20 h video and 2 h audio) and this discourse data was complemented by the delegates' metapragmatic reflection comments made in twelve evening meetings. Non-participant observation notes were also kept and post-event open-ended questions were emailed to the US participants. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the first author's university and all participants gave permission for all of the above types of data to be collected.

An unusual and fortuitous arrangement enabled the field researcher to obtain the metapragmatic data spontaneously rather than eliciting them. The HoD decided to convene a reflection meeting at the end of every working day so the delegates could discuss what had happened during the day and plan for the next day. Their comments were recorded in full by the field researcher using interpreter's shorthand. This resulted in over fifty pages of shorthand notes, which were subsequently transcribed and translated into a dataset of more than 15,000 words. These meetings thus offered an outstanding opportunity to learn about the Chinese participants' comments and evaluations of their interactions with their US hosts in a completely spontaneous manner.

Practical constraints made it impossible to interview the US participants, as the delegation moved from one organisation to another, even during the same day. However, a small amount of evaluative data was obtained from them by emailing them after the visit and asking them to respond to some open-ended questions.

3.3. Role of the Field Researcher

At the time of the trip, the field researcher was working in an administrative capacity within the Chinese ministry and was familiar with the delegation members. Her role in the trip was to handle all administrative and organisational matters, but not the interpreting in meetings. She was able to attend all the events as a bona fide participant and since the delegates knew her well, they showed no reservations in sharing their comments in the evening meetings.

She informed the Chinese and US participants in advance that she was doing research on communication and asked their permission to collect the data for research purposes. They were all happy to give their permission.

We do not deny that the field researcher's dual role (as delegation member and researcher) could potentially have had an impact on the data collected, particularly for the US participants. However, in our view the impact was negligible: she played no role in the video/audio recorded daytime meetings and in the evening meetings she simply took notes as a passive participant.

3.4. The Analytic Approach

Our first step in analysing the data was to import the transcriptions of the twelve evening meetings into the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 15.11. Then sections of the transcripts where the delegates commented in some way on the American hosts' communication behaviour were selected for further analysis and coding.

In coding our data, we took our unit of analysis to be a speaker's turn, while allowing each turn to be coded to as many different communication features (e.g., self-disclosure, humour) as mentioned. In other words, if a speaker mentioned a given feature more than once in a single turn, it was only coded once; but if they referred to two or more different features (e.g., self-disclosure, building common ground), each different feature that was mentioned was coded separately. The codes were developed in a bottom-up manner, while also bearing in mind the categories identified through our literature review.

To gain insights into the impact of communication behaviour on the delegates' evaluative comments, we then located—wherever possible—the corresponding discourse data in the video/audio recordings so we could compare the communication behaviour with their evaluative comments. Occasionally there was no corresponding discourse data because the interaction took place outside of the formal meetings.

4. Findings

In this section we report our findings. We start by reporting the delegates' stated goals for the exchange visit. This is followed by descriptions of the rapport-salient (positive and negative) experiences they encountered, and then the communication strategies they used to deal with the experiences they found challenging.

4.1. Goals

The overall purpose of the trip was twofold: (a) to gain information and insights into the corresponding ministry in the USA and (b) to build and strengthen collaborative relations between the two ministries.

On the very first day, in the evening meeting, the HoD emphasised the importance of relationship building for the trip, commenting as follows:

HoD: We must develop a good relationship with every organization in order to promote the development of relations between the Chinese Ministry of [name] and the United States Department of [name]. From the time of our arrival till the day we leave the United States, we must put the relations with the US Department of [name] first and every exchange and every visit are opportunities to boost our relations.

(Metapragmatic comment 1)

In the following 11 meetings, 7 different delegates made 14 comments that their relations were being enhanced. For example, in the 5th evening meeting which took place at the end of week 1 of the visit, the Deputy HoD commented as follows:

Deputy HoD: The relations with the American side have been strengthened day by day through the business meetings this week.

(Metapragmatic comment 2)

In their last evening meeting, the HoD and Deputy HoD summarised their achievements during the trip and both commented how well they had built relationships with their US counterparts and concluded that they had achieved the key goal of their trip. For example, the HoD commented as follows:

HoD: In the past three weeks, we have gradually elevated our delegation's image through business activities day in and day out. The primary goal of developing good relations with the Americans has basically been achieved.

(Metapragmatic comment 3)

The HoD also commented that they had successfully achieved the other main goal of their visit—to gain

insights into how the corresponding US ministry arranged things. He mentioned that their meetings with more than twenty different organizations had given them an excellent big picture of the breadth and depth of the corresponding ministry’s arrangements in the United States.

So, what communication strategies helped them achieve that? The following sections explore this.

4.2. Rapport-Salient Experiences

The delegates commented in the evening meetings on a range of experiences that were salient to them from a rapport perspective. They commented on experiences

that they perceived as rapport-enhancing in ten out of the twelve evening meetings, making a total of 29 different comments, and they commented on experiences that they perceived as rapport-undermining in five out of the twelve evening meetings, making a total of 26 different comments (see Tables 3 and 4 below). We report on these two different types of rapport-salient experiences in turn.

4.2.1. Experiences Perceived as Rapport-Enhancing

As can be seen from Table 3, the delegates perceived a range of experiences as rapport-enhancing.

Table 3. Types of communication experiences that delegates perceived as rapport-enhancing.

Communication features perceived to be rapport-enhancing	Number of Meetings	Number of Comments
Informative presentations/discussion sessions	10	29
Easy-going communication style	6	9
Humour	5	7
Identification of common ground	4	5
Personal disclosure	4	4
	2	4

The most frequent number of comments, including the range of meetings in which they were mentioned, concerned the professional information provided by the US speakers. The delegates commented on issues such as the relevance of their talks and the expertise they displayed. This understandably helped address the knowledge enhancement goal for the trip while simultaneously helping build relational links.

The delegates often linked the informative nature of the sessions with the communication style of their US hosts, commenting regularly on their easy-going and casual style, relaxed manner, and their sincerity and humour. Their comments indicate that it was their hosts’ communication style that enabled them to share and discuss more freely with their hosts and to establish points of common ground. For example, one delegate commented as follows:

Delegate PLG: In the late morning, the informal discussions were informative. They just let us ask whatever questions we wanted and returned with their questions. The officials of the office were all easy-going and casual. They answered our questions in great detail and even went to find the files and photocopied the documents of a previous [name] case we were discussing. Though the meeting was less formal than I expected, their casualness and sincerity touched me.

(Metapragmatic comment 4)

We report below three examples, showing both the discourse data and the associated metapragmatic comments, to illustrate the various ways in which the American hosts’ communication behaviour helped enhance mutual rapport.

In the first example (see Discourse extract 1), the US speaker wrote ‘China’ in Chinese characters on a flip chart and then drew on Chinese history to demonstrate the diachronic development in the USA of their shared professional sector.

Discourse extract 1. Building common ground.

US Speaker 1	OK, I’ve made myself a little time chart here. This is time going on. On one side, I put USA. On the other side, I put China. By the way, did I spell China correctly? <i>(Chinese delegates nod their heads and laugh in response)</i>
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The delegates very much appreciated this—nodding and laughing in response, with one of them going forward afterwards to compliment the US speaker on his knowledge of Chinese history. In the evening meeting that day, they commented on it very positively.

Deputy HoD: The American officials we met today had a better understanding of China. This is one of the reasons why our relations with the American side have become closer.

Delegate CXD: Yes, the speaker in the morning was humorous and he could even write Chinese characters. I was very pleasantly surprised. That absolutely drew us closer.

Delegate XD: That’s true. I actually praised the official after the meeting about his knowledge of Chinese history in particular.

(Metapragmatic comment 5)

In other words, the US speaker sought to build common ground with the delegates through shared awareness of Chinese history, and this helped the delegates feel closer to their US counterparts. Other types of common ground that the participants found they shared through discussion were travel experiences and workplace problems, all of which helped them to bond.

A second example illustrates the US hosts' use of humour that the delegates appreciated. For instance, on one occasion a US host used humour to defuse a potentially embarrassing incident. The Chinese HoD had just given him a gift and when he unwrapped it, he found that it was a lady's fan. He made a joke out of it, as shown in Discourse extract 2.

Discourse extract 2. Use of humour.

US Speaker 2	<i>(US Speaker 2 unwraps the gift which he sees is a fan)</i> So I could use it, right? <i>(Unfolds the fan and finds that it is a traditional Chinese fan for ladies)</i>
US Speaker 3	Oh! That's beautiful!
US Speaker 2	Does this make me sexy? <i>(Waves the lady's fan)</i>
Interpreter	Make you sexy. Hhhhh <i>(Interpreter laughs while repeating US Speaker 2's words in English)</i>
Delegates & hosts	Hhhhh <i>(Everyone in the room laughs)</i>
US Speaker 2	Thank you

In the evening meeting for that day, one of the few delegates who could understand a little English drew the group's attention to the incident (see Metapragmatic comment 6).

This could have been very embarrassing for the delegates, but they clearly felt that the US speaker's humour helped minimise this. The delegates also took it as a learning point, with the HoD advising that they should be very careful in allocating gifts going forward and ideally should find out in advance the gender of the US hosts they would be meeting.

Delegate SZJ: But it was not that satisfactory in the morning. The American professor was VERY easy-going and NICE. He actually saved our face with his humour. He said that the lady's fan made him sexy. It was a little bit embarrassing. We should be 200% careful about gift preparation from now on.

A third example illustrates the use of personal disclosure in formal settings. This was very unexpected for the Chinese, but they appreciated the openness of their hosts. For instance, one speaker mentioned his family background and how his parents, brother and sister all worked with poor people. In the evening the delegates expressed surprise that he would share this when meeting for the first time but seemed pleased that he had done so. On another occasion, the US speaker started his presentation by talking about his grandchildren, and how meeting with the delegates was so important to him that he had been willing to leave them to come to the meeting (see Discourse extract 3).

HoD: Really? Did he say that? Then he did save our face.

Delegate SZJ: Yes, he said so.
(Metapragmatic comment 6)

Discourse extract 3. Use of personal disclosure.

US Speaker 4	It's a great honour for me to be here and to be able to talk to a group of officials ... who are working on the issues of [X] in China. To further emphasise [US Speaker 3]'s comments on the last sentence of my bio, it was an honour enough for me to leave my two grandchildren in [name of City] so that I can be with you today to do this. My wife and I just brought them back with us from [name of state] for a visit, a four-year grandson who is very energetic and an eight-year granddaughter. Anyway, thank you very much for inviting me.
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In the evening, the Deputy HoD brought this up, commenting how surprised he was and how different this was from official meetings in China. The whole tone of the comments was positive, conveying the impression that they appreciated being treated as though their affiliation was close (see Metapragmatic comment 7).

mentioned them at the beginning of his speech as if we were really familiar.

Deputy HoD: By the way, [Speaker 4] really loved his grandchildren and I was surprised that he

Delegate SZJ: Actually he said that we were important enough for him to leave his lovely grandchildren to be here with us. The translator did not translate all his words.

Deputy HoD: I see.

HoD: [Deputy HoD], you are thinking of your grandson again, right? [joking]

Deputy HoD: No, I was shocked because we will never use our family members as an opening for an official meeting with people we don't know or foreign guests. Yes, I talk about my grandson all day long, but I only talk to you. I would not talk to Americans about that. But his grandchildren sounded cute.

(Metapragmatic comment 7)

Table 4. Types of communication experiences that delegates perceived as rapport-undermining.

	Number of Meetings	Number of Comments
Communication features perceived to be rapport-undermining	5	28
Impact of interpreter	4	12
Request refusal	1	9
No return speech invitation	1	5
Minimal toasting at banquet by host	2	2

The least potentially damaging experiences related to hosting behaviour at banquets. On two different occasions the delegates were disappointed that their US hosts engaged in very little toasting behaviour. They were expecting to be served liquor for toasting (not just wine), and for the US chair to go round to different tables proposing toasts. They felt his failure to do so affected the atmosphere negatively. Metapragmatic comment 8 illustrates the HoD's reaction on one of these occasions.

HoD: The farewell lunch was not bad. The only problem was that they didn't provide liquor and we had to propose toasts with red wine, so the atmosphere was not very good in the first half. The American head of [name] proposed a toast to our delegation on behalf of all Americans present and that was all. He did not go to the other tables. I was sitting with him at the same table and as he did not do that, I felt obliged not to do more than the host. It was a pity!

(Metapragmatic comment 8)

There was only one comment per incident, though, suggesting that the experience had relatively little relational impact. The other experiences elicited many more comments per incident.

One of these was the lack of opportunity for the HoD to give a return speech. The US host on this occasion moved immediately from her welcome speech to the content for the session, without inviting the HoD to give a return speech. This was a breach of protocol in the delegates' eyes, conveying a sense of lack of equality between the two parties. Interestingly, though, the HoD took the opportunity to give a five-minute return speech as soon as the host opened the floor for questions. The delegates commented at length on that in their evening meeting, as Metapragmatic comment 9 illustrates.

4.2.2. Rapport-Undermining Experiences

Despite the overall positive experiences, the delegates inevitably had some experiences that upset or annoyed them. These were fewer in number and range than the rapport-enhancing experiences but tended to elicit a greater number of comments by a larger number of delegates.

Table 4 shows types of experiences they encountered that were (potentially) rapport-undermining.

Delegate SZJ: [HoD], they didn't even ask you to give a return speech, am I right? That's so impolite. They just skipped right over us and moved on.

HoD: Yes, they started the introduction right after their welcome speech. I was very surprised.

Delegate LL: At that moment, we were all surprised. It was such a formal meeting and depriving us of the right to speak was ridiculous.

Delegate SFM: Indeed, it was extremely impolite on such a formal occasion where we were all equals. But [HoD] did a very good job by making up for our return speech after the floor was opened to questions. This implied our firm position.

Delegate PLG: Absolutely! [HoD's] move indicated that we know what our rights are and he fought for our face. This really was a meaningful action.

(Metapragmatic comment 9)

On this occasion, the HoD took rectification action and the delegates appreciated that. On another occasion, though, the delegates were less successful. It was getting towards the end of their visit and the delegates were very tired after many days of busy schedules. So, after one very successful morning meeting, they asked their host if the remaining meetings could be re-scheduled. They were very shocked and annoyed that she refused in a seemingly point-blank manner. Unfortunately, we do not have a recording of the exact exchange, as it occurred outside of the formal meetings, but the delegates' negative reactions were captured in the evening meeting comments that day. Their sense of offence seems to be reflected in the large number of comments by different delegates.

HoD: It was too hectic today! I asked the director at [name] to change the schedule for the rest of the meetings with the other divisions, but she was not very polite to refuse us upfront.

Delegate ZHS: We were shocked at that moment. She didn't ask the other divisions and then refused our request abruptly. "No, we can't do that because it is such short notice."

Delegate XD: It was a dramatic turn. The first meeting with the international division went very well. We had built good relations. ... Suddenly however she refused our request so firmly. Everything began to deteriorate. ...

Delegate RJK: That's true. They were definitely impolite. She didn't want to know our reason for rescheduling at all. She didn't ask, did she?

Delegate LXY: No. We just asked tentatively because we did not want to impose. Nor did we expect that she would respond without any leeway. At least she should say, "OK. I'm afraid that I have to ask the other divisions you are going to meet" and it would be an ideal opportunity for her to show the host's concern for the guests by asking us why we wanted to change the schedule.

Deputy HoD: That's correct. We didn't tell her why we were asking, that we were so exhausted. We only made a tentative request. This was already a concession—we were putting ourselves in their shoes. Otherwise, we would have told her about our long journey and previous intensive activities. If I were the host, I would put the guest's need first. The primary goal of us hosting foreign visitors at home is to meet their needs as far as possible. We wouldn't just refuse such a request but would do our utmost to make the arrangement and only say 'no' if it really isn't possible. Of course we shouldn't evaluate Americans by Chinese standards. ... Maybe the problem is that she treated us too 'equally' rather than regarding us as 'special visitors'. I don't know, but all of us

were definitely offended by her response right after the successful meeting.

HoD: We lost part of our face.

(Metapragmatic comment 10)

It can be seen from these numerous comments that the delegates were clearly annoyed. However, it was just a single incident during a three-week trip and, judging from their final comments (see Metapragmatic comment 3) it did not have a significant impact on the trip as a whole.

There were four other incidents, involving the Chinese interpreter, that the delegates were particularly annoyed about. Three of these involved interruptions.

In the first, the interpreter interrupted the US speaker and asked her to speak in longer sentences. Without doing this, it would have been impossible for her to interpret, given the structural differences between Chinese and English. However, the delegates noticed that the speaker blushed, indicating embarrassment, and the delegates felt this not only made the speaker lose face, but also affected their own face, since the US speaker might think they had instigated the interruption.

Later in the same meeting, the delegates started discussing among themselves in Chinese after the US speaker had answered a question. They became quite loud and animated in their discussions and when the interpreter could not hear what another person had asked, she shouted 'be quiet'. They were very offended by this. They commented on it in the evening meeting, criticising her for acting inappropriately like a teacher.

On another occasion, the interpreter also interrupted their discussions in a similar way. In that day's evening meeting, they complained that she was acting like a judge, and that it had caused them to lose even more face because the meeting was a very formal one.

On each of these occasions, the interpreter kept all parties informed as to what was happening, explaining to each when something had taken place in the other language. The delegates found this unnecessary and condescending. Discourse extracts 4 and 5 and Metapragmatic comment 11 illustrate this.

Discourse extract 4. An instruction.

Interpreter	<p>[One of the delegates asks a question.]</p> <p>中You're all speaking too loudly, I can't hear your questions clearly 中</p> <p>[Smiles while looking around the room. Speaker looks confused.]</p> <p>中BE QUIET! 中</p>
Interpreter	<p>[The interpreter shouts to the whole room. Delegates become quiet immediately & speaker smiles in an embarrassed way.]</p>

[Key: 中 indicates words spoken in Chinese].

Discourse extract 5. Keeping all parties informed.

HoD	中 Thank you very much for helping us understand Y 中
Interpreter (to US hosts)	Thank you very much for your wonderful introduction. You just gave them numerous useful information. They are very very interested. That's the reason why they had a very enthusiastic and passionate discussion. They hope you can FORGIVE our discussion. Of course, we respect you very much. Just BECAUSE of your wonderful lecture, we had such an enthusiastic discussion. Thank you very much.
US speaker 2	You're very kind.
All guests	[US speaker 2 bows his head to the delegation leader. Others nod.]
Interpreter	中 Yes, he said you're very kind. Just now, I explained to him what you said. I told him that it was just because you were so interested in what he said that you became so noisy. I said you greatly respect him and like him. 中
HoD	中 Uhmm 中

[Key: 中 indicates words spoken in Chinese].

4.3. Strategies for Managing Rapport

We now consider the strategies that the delegates used to manage rapport.

At the very beginning of the trip, the HoD gave the delegates a number of clear instructions:

- Avoid controversial topics
- Don't give your personal opinion
- Don't argue
- Do in Rome as the Romans do

In addition, he and the Deputy HoD explained that if the group experienced any unexpected situations, they should not say anything at the time but rather raise it at the evening meetings.

HoD: We will hold a meeting every evening to summarize our day of exchanges, raise issues, find solutions, and better prepare for the next day. ... So we'll meet every evening around 7 or 8pm in my suite to discuss what happened today and prepare for the following days ...

Deputy HoD: Yes. We must abide by this discipline. Coming back to American customs, I noticed that there might be some unexpected things or situations we could not understand. We'd better note them down and bring them to the evening discussions rather than bringing them up with the Americans in public. For example, today the American professors did not open their gifts on the spot, even though we were told that Americans usually like to open their gifts immediately in front of the donor. We'd better keep silent rather than challenging them why they did not do that, so I think we should keep this attitude. When it comes to problematic situations, we should not speak or behave rashly. We'd better show that nothing is going wrong otherwise it may embarrass both sides. We may discuss the reasons and solutions as much as possible in our internal meetings afterwards. Let's accomplish this trip successfully.

(Metapragmatic comment 12)

The delegates kept to these guidelines very carefully over the following weeks. There are no examples of the delegates questioning any arrangements or issues with their hosts, except for the one occasion when they were exhausted and asked for a change of schedule (see Metapragmatic comment 10). As reported in Section 4.2.2, they were not at all happy with the interpreter but still decided not to say anything lest they cause embarrassment both to the host and to themselves. There were also a few hosting issues, where they were confused or occasionally offended, but they said nothing to their hosts and the HoD advised them in the evenings to accept any cultural differences and adapt to them.

One aspect of their own behaviour—that of raising questions in the Q and A sessions—emerged on the second day of meetings. After the US presentations, the delegates did not raise any questions when given the opportunity to do so but instead asked the speaker individually afterwards. This shortened their time for lunch, and so the HoD and Deputy HoD raised it in the evening meeting. The HoD advised them to ask their questions when invited to do so, and they also planned carefully who should answer if the US speakers asked any return questions.

Deputy HoD: When they say 'any questions', just raise them upfront. Don't be hesitant. And when they ask us questions in return, we'd better choose one person, for example, our HoD, to answer it instead of several of us answering it at the same time. What do you think, [HoD]?

HoD: That's right. I will first give a general answer and if I need some additional information from you, I will point to you in sequence. Don't take your turn at the same time and don't speak for too long in your turn. In this way, we can avoid asking repeated questions and giving repeated answers.

(Metapragmatic comment 13)

The next day they implemented this arrangement very effectively, and in the evening the HoD evaluated it

positively, saying “The Q&A sessions went on more smoothly, and our relationships with the American side have become closer.”

At the end of the whole trip, they concluded that their strategy of dealing with issues by discussing them in the evening meetings worked very well.

Deputy HoD: More often than not the meetings went on smoothly, but there were some points when problems popped up, which might have led to some misunderstandings. Sometimes we couldn't point them out to the interpreters who were hired by the American side. That's why the evening meetings were valuable. Such a way of communicating turned out to work well. (Metapragmatic comment 14)

5. Discussion

We now discuss our findings in relation to each of our research questions.

5.1. RQ1: Communication Behaviour Perceived as Rapport-Enhancing

The range of communication strategies that Chinese delegates perceived as rapport-enhancing was small compared with the long lists shown in Table 1.

As reported in Table 3, the delegates commented positively on five different rapport management strategies: humour, building common ground, personal disclosure, informative presentations/discussions, and communication style.

Humour and building common ground correspond to strategies that many others have identified, including those listed in Table 1.

Self-disclosure is also widely regarded as an important aspect of relationship development (e.g., Marsden, 2020; Mirivel, 2014). Yum and Hara (2006) make the point that there is normally a trajectory of development in the depth of self-disclosure, with participants gradually sharing more personal topics as their relationship develops. In line with this, the delegates were surprised by the sharing of personal information that some of the US speakers engaged in during their first meeting. They were surprised by this but not at all offended. On the contrary, they were moved and complimented by the comments, feeling they were being treated as familiar acquaintances.

Another positively evaluated behaviour was the informative presentations given by the US speakers. This might seem a transactional strategy rather than one for building rapport. However, since learning about the US system was an explicit goal for the trip, any failure to provide quality information would have been likely to frustrate and disappoint the delegates. This is in line with rapport management theory (e.g., Chen, 2022; Spencer-

Oatey, 2008; Spencer-Oatey & Lazidou, 2024) that identifies interactional goals as a key trigger factor for the management of rapport; in other words, communication that facilitates achievement of goals is typically evaluated positively while behaviour that thwarts the achievement of goals usually causes annoyance or upset. The delegates were very pleased with the amount of relevant information that was shared and discussed with them, and it seems that this helped foster positive relations.

The delegates linked the positive information sessions with the relaxed and easy-going manner of the hosts, as we noted above (e.g., see Metapragmatic comment 4). Interestingly, communication/interactional style is only mentioned in passing, if at all, in the majority of publications on (im)politeness/rapport management. In intercultural communication publications, a number of different styles are mentioned (FitzGerald, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005), but formality–informality is rarely mentioned, except occasionally in relation to terms of address. This seems strange given the importance that it has in different types of communicative events.

5.2. RQ2: Communication Behaviour Perceived as Rapport-Undermining

As reported in Table 4, the delegates commented on four different behaviours that they found problematic or disappointing in some way: limited number of toasts, a request refusal, lack of invitation to give a return speech, and the interpreter's ‘controlling’ behaviour.

The limited number of toasts given by the US main host at the farewell banquets was disappointing to the hosts insofar as it conveyed to them a lack of warmth and enthusiasm. This seems closely related to the Chinese norms for this type of communicative event, where the expected artifacts are liquor (not just wine) and where procedurally the host is expected to go from table to table offering toasts at each. The delegates did not reflect verbally on possible different norms for farewell meals in the USA, but they were also not very upset by the difference—they were disappointed rather than offended.

The request refusal was a different matter, though—they were extremely annoyed and offended by this. Requests and refusals are widely acknowledged within pragmatics to be potentially face-threatening acts which need careful wording (e.g., Babai Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kinjo, 1987). According to the delegates' comments, they asked very tentatively, and the host refused bluntly, without any mitigation or negotiation. This would inevitably be face-threatening, as Babai Shishavan and Sharifian (2016, p. 76) explain:

[Refusals] impose a threat to the face of the hearer because in performing a refusal the speaker declines to give the response his/her interlocutor expects to receive. Therefore, refusals can be interpreted as a form of disapproval or

disrespect. The recipient of a refusal might take this act as a sign of impoliteness or ultimately of dislike. Furthermore, refusals are complex speech acts, with their production usually involving extended negotiations and verbal cooperation as well as face-saving actions to mitigate their uncooperative nature.

It seems that the US host did not engage in any negotiation and the delegates were annoyed and offended that she did not take their exhaustion into consideration. On the other hand, it would clearly have been extremely difficult for her to re-arrange all the afternoon appointments at such very short notice, especially given the number of different people involved. The delegates did not show any awareness of the host's perspective, but it also seems that she did not explain the difficulty from her perspective. This seems to be a case of minimal consideration of the other party's needs by both sides in what was inevitably a difficult situation.

The third issue, the lack of invitation to give a return speech, was perceived by the delegates as disrespectful. It breached their expectations for this type of communicative event where the 'normal' procedure would be for the head of the visiting delegation to give a return speech after the chair host has given the welcome speech. This seems to be an international convention for formal meetings. In this case, it is likely that the US hosts did not regard the event as sufficiently formal for this procedure to be expected and followed. As we noted with regard to rapport-enhancing strategies, the US hosts had an informal interactional style, and the delegates appreciated that. For this more conventionalised procedure, however, they were offended. Interestingly, exactly the same type of pragmatic failure is reported by Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2008).

The fourth issue, the 'controlling' behaviour of the interpreter is another issue of role conventions and responsibilities. For these instances, however, it seems to be linked not so much to culturally-based procedural conventions for a communicative event as to sector understandings of the role responsibilities of interpreters as professionals. As explained in the literature review, interpreters have traditionally been regarded as conduits of information, with limited or no right of intervention. Yet discourse studies have shown that in actual fact interpreters actively engage in relational work and pursue the goals of their clients (Mapson & Major, 2021). In the instances that the delegates found problematic, the interpreter was trying to fulfil her obligations, not only to interpret accurately what each party said, but also to provide as much transparency as possible. This can be uncomfortable for clients as Mapson and Major (2021, p. 64) explain:

Being interpreted may impact on a speaker's positive self-image, or 'face' (Goffman, 1967) with interpreters unwittingly disrupting behavioural

norms ..., which can be evident in the more controlled turn-taking that interpreters may instigate ...

They go on to report that Theys et al. (2020) found that in the health sector, clinicians disliked their loss of direct communication when working through an interpreter and were challenged by their perceived loss of overall control. It seems that this is exactly how the Chinese delegates felt. Their criticism of the interpreter was understandable from their perspective, but also reflected a lack of awareness of how professional interpreters may need to work.

5.3. RQ3: Strategies Used to Manage (Potentially) Problematic Interactions

Throughout the trip, the delegates used a strong avoidance strategy in communicating with their hosts about anything they found unexpected or problematic. Instead of raising or even mentioning it to them, they talked about it among themselves in the evening meetings. This is actually in line with everyday advice not to respond hastily to messages that are annoying or upsetting, and to take time to calm down and reflect before responding.

This also supports Spencer-Oatey and Kádár's (2021) identification of the need to include cognitive reflection and planning in any theorisation of rapport management. The delegates made evaluative judgements of the other person(s) and what they did, decided to talk about it among themselves, and then dropped the issue—exactly as Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021, p. 199) outline.

In intercultural communication, reflecting on upsetting or surprising encounters is regarded as important for the development of intercultural competence (e.g., Nam & Condon, 2010; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2022; Taylor, 1994). People are typically encouraged to move through the following three steps:

- (a) Describe as objectively as possible what happened and how they felt
- (b) Reflect on why they felt as they did, and why the other person may have said or done what they did
- (c) Reconsider their reaction

This is not actually what the delegates did. They first made evaluative judgements of the other person(s) and what they did, merging evaluation with description. Then, with rare exceptions, they did not discuss why the other party had behaved as they did or try to understand their reasons for doing so. Rather, they used the opportunity to express—or vent—their emotional reactions. It seems that the more annoying or upsetting the experience, the greater the number of delegates making comments. They therefore did not gain insights or become more intercultural aware. On the other hand, talking together and sharing their evaluative reactions seemed to serve the purpose of helping them reduce their negative emotions

and judgements. This in itself was valuable in terms of their goals for the visit.

5.4. Limitations and Conceptual Reflections

One important limitation of our study is that the metapragmatic comments were only made by the Chinese delegates; we do not have comparable data for the US hosts or the interpreter. As other research has shown (e.g., Chang & Haugh, 2011; Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2004, 2019), participants may make significantly different evaluative judgements of the same interaction, especially when their cultural norms and expectations are noticeably different. Fourteen US participants returned a follow-up questionnaire with responses to six open questions, and their comments offer a useful complementary perspective. Nevertheless, their comments were very limited and so we are unable to know how far the US participants' evaluations of their developing relationship were or were not in line with those of the Chinese. Having said that, there were a few informative comments from one American regarding the behaviour of the interpreter (see Discourse extracts 4 and 5). She was extremely positive about the interpreter, while the Chinese were extremely negative, which reinforces the possibility of different reactions to the same interaction, especially in intercultural contexts. (See Spencer-Oatey & Wang, 2025 for a detailed discussion of this data.)

These findings draw attention to two important data collection factors when analysing rapport in interaction:

- metapragmatic comments significantly complement discourse data, offering deeper insights;
- whenever possible, metapragmatic comments should be obtained from all participants.

Conversation analysts believe in relying completely on the discourse data in their analyses; our contention is that people may mask their reactions for relational (or other) purposes and that post-event metapragmatic comments can offer important insights that otherwise would not emerge. Clearly, there can be practical constraints in obtaining such data, and when obtained through post-event interviews, people may reconstruct their reactions (Mann, 2011). Nevertheless, we would argue that it is worth trying to gather as much metapragmatic data as possible, when participants' perspectives are of interest.

5.5. Professional Development Implications

Despite the limitation of a one-sided perspective, this study offers several valuable implications for professional development, irrespective of people's backgrounds. Given the large amount of individual and contextual variation that always affects interaction, in our view it is never helpful to be prescriptive in approach or to make broad generalisations about people from particular national groups. Rather, the key is to enhance professionals' awareness of

key features of communication that they can usefully pay attention to. From our findings, these include:

- Interactional style, especially level of formality
- Mutual understanding of each other's goals
- Opportunities to build common ground
- Level of personal disclosure
- Level of imposition/control

Rapport is strengthened when there is alignment of preferences in the above and so it is important to manage and adjust them as needed.

These communication strategies are all influenced by a range of contextual factors, especially normative expectations associated with communicative events. These are extremely important because different participants may have different conceptions of procedural matters (e.g., who can speak when) and/or of the role responsibilities of the various parties.

The delegation in this study very usefully talked through with each other their experiences during the day. However, it would be beneficial to provide more principle-based pre-departure training that would help them to reflect more meaningfully and to gain insights into other parties' perspectives. Spencer-Oatey and Lazidou (2024) provide some useful templates to aid with this.

6. Conclusions

In this study we have examined a dataset of spontaneous metapragmatic comments made by a delegation of senior Chinese officials visiting the USA on a three-week trip. A key goal of their visit was to build positive collaborative relations with their counterparts and so their metapragmatic comments on their daily experiences were analysed from that perspective. We focused on identifying the communication strategies used, their impact on delegates' perceptions of relationship development, and what reaction/response strategies they chose.

The delegates particularly appreciated the informal and relaxed communication style of their US hosts and the ways in which they sought to build common ground with their guests. They were surprised at the level of personal disclosure of some of the speakers, and although this was different from what they were expecting, they actually appreciated it. Their main dissatisfaction was with the interpreter, whom they found to be too controlling. Their main strategy was to avoid saying anything to others and to discuss any issues among themselves in the evening.

The delegates' decision to discuss their experiences every evening was very beneficial, but they tended simply to express their evaluative comments rather than seek to understand anyone else's perspective. So, we suggest that non-linguist professionals would benefit from professional development that could help them reflect from different angles. Overall, the study shows that rapport is more than polite behaviour; it is a deliberate, context-

sensitive practice that builds trust and makes genuine collaboration possible across cultural boundaries.

Author Contributions

H.S.-O. conceptualised the analysis for this article and drafted the text. J.W. collected the original data, transcribed and translated the data, and carried out original analyses under the supervision of H.S.-O. J.W. checked and commented on the draft of this text. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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