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A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF POLITENESS THEORIES IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The scope of politeness – different approaches towards the politeness phenomena

There is little agreement among researchers in the field about what, exactly, constitutes politeness and the domain of related research.

Watts (1992) distinguishes between *social politeness* and *interpersonal politeness – tact*. Both types of politeness – *social* and *interpersonal* – are culturally acquired, and interrelated in speech. *Social politeness* is rooted in people's need for smoothly organized interaction with other members of their group. *Tact* is rooted in people's need to maintain face, in their fear of losing it, and in their reluctance to deprive others of it (Goffman 1967).

The difference between *tact* and *social politeness* is that whereas the function of *social politeness* is essentially to coordinate social interaction – to regulate the mechanical exchange of roles and activities – the function of *tact* is quite different: namely to preserve face and regulate interpersonal relationships. In fact, it is probably not *social politeness* that enables people to avoid most everyday interpersonal conflicts, but *tact*.

Linguistic politeness, in turn, is based on *interpersonal politeness*. Watts (1989) uses the term *politic verbal behaviour* to cover various realizations of linguistic politeness in language usage.

It is very difficult to draw the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic politeness as there is a clear interrelation between them.

The social norm view

This approach assumes that each society has a particular set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behaviour, a state

of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is in congruence with the norm, a negative evaluation (impoliteness) when an action is to the contrary (Fraser 1990).

The normative view historically considers politeness to be associated with speech style, whereby a higher degree of formality implies greater politeness. More recently, Quirk *et al.* (1985:338) reveal the same orientation:

> *[…] The non-standard usage of 'Me and Mary are...' [is] more reprehensible, though nonetheless common, if the offending pronoun also violates the rule of politeness which stipulates that 1ˢᵗ person pronouns should occur at the end of the coordinate construction...Another reason is that 'x and I' is felt to be a polite sequence which can remain unchanged […].*

It is safe to say that the social-norm approach has few adherents among current researchers.

The conversational-maxim view

The conversational-maxim perspective relies principally on the work of Grice (1975) – his now classic paper 'Logic and conversation'. In an attempt to clarify how it is that speakers can mean more than they 'say', Grice argued that conversationalists are rational individuals who are, all other things being equal, primarily interested in the efficient conveying of messages. To this end, he proposed the Cooperative Principle (CP) which postulates that one should say what he/she has to say, when he/she has to say it, and the way he/she has to say it.

Lakoff (1973) was among the first to adopt Grice's construct of Conversational Principles in an effort to account for politeness. Unlike Grice, however, Lakoff (1973) explicitly extends the notion of grammatical rule and its associated notion of well-formedness to pragmatics: *We should like to have some kind of pragmatic rules, dictating whether an utterance is pragmatically well-formed or not, and the extent to which it deviates if it does* (Lakoff 1973:296). Extending this to the domain of politeness, she considers the form of sentences – i.e., specific constructions to be polite or not.

In her later works she refers to politeness as: *a device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction* (Lakoff 1979:64). Lakoff (1973) suggests two rules of Pragmatic Competence: (i) Be Clear (essentially Grice's maxims), and (ii) Be Polite.

She takes these to be in opposition to each other, and notes that they are at times reinforcing, at other times in conflict. In addition she posits sub-maxims (sub-rules), adapted as follows: *Rule 1:* Don't Impose (used when Formal/Impersonal Politeness is required), *Rule 2:* Give Options (used when Informal Politeness is required, *Rule 3:* Make 'A' Feel Good (used when Intimate Politeness is required).

These three rules are applicable more or less depending on the type of politeness situation as understood by the speaker. For example, if a speaker assesses the situations as requiring Intimate Politeness, window shutting might be requested by uttering: 'Shut the window', while Informal Politeness might be met with 'Please shut the window'. The reader is never told how the speaker or hearer is to assess what level of politeness is required.

The position of Leech (1983) is a grand elaboration of the Conversational Maxim approach to politeness. Like Lakoff, Leech (1983) adopts the framework initially set out by Grice: there exists a set of maxims and sub-maxims that guide and constrain the conversation of rational people.

Important to Leech's theory is his distinction between a speaker's illocutionary goals (what speech act(s) the speaker intends to be conveyed by the utterance) and the speaker's social goals (what position the speaker is taking on being truthful, polite, ironic, and the like). In this regard, he posits two sets of conversational (rhetorical) principles – Interpersonal Rhetoric and Textual Rhetoric, each constituted by a set of maxims, which socially constrain communicative behavior in specific ways.

Politeness, never explicitly defined, is treated within the domain of Interpersonal Rhetoric, which contains the following first-order principles: those falling under the terms of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), those associated with a Politeness Principle (PP), those associated with an Interest Principle (IP) and Pollyanna Principle. The Interest principle is briefly characterized as: 'say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting', the Polyanna Principle postulates that participants in a conversation will prefer pleasant topics of conversation to unpleasant ones (euphemism is one aspect of this principle).

Each of these Interpersonal Principles has the same status in his pragmatic theory, with the (CP) and its associated maxims used to explain how an utterance may be interpreted to convey indirect messages, and the (PP) and its maxims used to explain why such indirectness might be used.

Leech's Principle of Politeness can be stated as the following: other things being equal, minimize the expression of beliefs which are unfavorable to the hearer and at the same time (but less important) maximize the expression of beliefs which are favorable to the hearer.

Leech (1983:119) provides a finer differentiation within his principles. He proposes six Interpersonal Maxims:

Tact Maxime: Minimize hearer costs; maximize hearer benefit.

(*Meta Maxim*: Do not put others in a position where they have to break the Tact Maxim.)

Generosity Maxime: Minimize your own benefit; maximize your hearer's benefit.

Approbation Maxime: Minimize hearer dispraise; maximize hearer praise.

Modesty Maxime: Minimize self-praise; maximize self-dispraise.

Agreement Maxime: Minimize disagreement between yourself and others; maximize agreement between yourself and others.

Sympathy Maxime: Minimize antipathy between yourself and others; maximize sympathy between yourself and others.

Leech (1983) distinguishes between what he calls 'Relative Politeness', which refers to politeness *vis-a-vis* a specific situation, and 'Absolute Politeness', which refers to the degree of politeness inherently associated with specific speaker actions. Thus, he takes some illocutions (e.g., orders) – and presumably the linguistic forms used to effect them – to be inherently impolite, and others (e.g., offers) to be inherently polite.

A modification of Leech's position, still within the conversational maxim perspective, can be found in Kasher (1986) who argues that where there are cases in which both the (CP) and (PP) apply, tug-of-war ensures, and what one needs is overriding principles of rationality to guide the resolution.

As has been presented above, Lakoff (1973) considered (CP) to be a subcase of the rules of politeness. Leech (1983) claims that (CP) and (PP) are pragmatic principles of the first-order, i.e. they are principles of equal linguistic status, coordinate and complementary rather than subordinate (of one in relation to the other). Despite Leech's postulate, it must be claimed that the (CP) is always basic because it defines a norm from which departures are accounted for in terms of other principles, e.g. (PP). Furthermore, the maxims of (CP) are valid for and may apply to the maxims of (PP) rather than the other way round; which seems to support the view of (CP) as the basic conversational principle in pragmatics (Kopytko 1993).

The face-saving view

Brown and Levinson's (1987) method – the face saving view – is constructivism not analysis. Consequently, by constructing a Model Person (MP) some aspects of language usage can be accounted for.

For Brown and Levinson (1987), a Model Person is a willful and fluent speaker of a natural language, endowed with two special properties – *rationality* and *face.* Rationality is to be understood as the availability to the (MP) of a mode of reasoning 'from ends to the means that will achieve those end'. The MP is also endowed with *face,* i.e. with two particular wants: (a) the want to be unimpeded (b) the want to be approved of in certain respects. A dyadic model of two cooperating MP's will account for a possible conflict between one MP's face wants and the other's want to say things that may infringe on those wants. Thus, linguistic strategies are derived as: *means satisfying communicative and face-oriented ends, in a strictly formal system of rational practical reasoning* (Brown and Levinson (1987:58)).

Brown and Levinson (1987) expect that the function of (MP) may be threefold: (1) as a reference model for the description of culture-specific styles of verbal interaction; as a means of characterizing, (2) the 'ethos' of a culture and subculture, and (3) the affective quality of social relationships.

Two characteristic features of Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach should be pointed out. The first of these is *a strictly formal system of rational 'practical reasoning'* and the second – *a predictive model.* Those notions unambiguously suggest that Brown and Levinson (1987) view pragmatics as a formalized and predicative body of linguistic data in contradistinction to the assumptions of the non-categorical and non-modular pragmatics. The concepts of *face* and *rationality* are crucial to the theory of politeness. They briefly summarize their arguments as follows (Brown and Levinson 1987):

(1) All MPs have *positive face* and *negative face,* and all MPs are *rational agents* – i.e. choose means that will satisfy their ends.

(2) Given that face consists in sets of wants satisfiable only by the actions of others, it will in general be to the mutual interest of two MP's not to threaten each other's face.

(3) Some acts intrinsically threaten face; these 'face-threatening acts' are referred to as FTA' s.

(4) S (speaker) will want to minimize the face threat of the FTA.

(5) The greater the risk of an FTA, the more S will want to choose a higher-numbered strategy (from the set of strategies at his disposal to minimize face risk).

Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have):

(i)'face', the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects:

(a) *negative face*: the basic claims to the territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

(b) *positive face*: the positive, consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire for this self – to be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants.

(ii) certain rational capacities, in particular consistent modes of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends.

Brown and Levinson (1987) adopted a reductionist method by reducing social facts – some norms of language usage – to the outcome of the rational choices of individuals.

Brown and Levinson (1987) list 15 substrategies of positive politeness and 10 of negative politeness and say that even these lists are not exhaustive. A slightly simplified and modified version of the substrategies of positive politeness is presented in Brown and Gilman (1989:167).

Brown and Levinsn (1987:102) distinguish fifteen substrategies of positive politeness: 1. Notice, attended to (H) (his interests, wants, needs, goods), 2. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H), 3. Intensify interest to (H), 4. Use in-group identity markers, 5. Seek agreement, 6. Avoid disagreement, 7. Presuppose, raise, assert common ground, 8. Joke, 9. Assert, presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants, 10. Offer, promise, 11. Be optimistic, 12. Include both (S) and (H) in the activity, 13. Give (or ask for) reasons, 14. Assume or assert reciprocity, 15. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).

The substrategies of negative politeness Brown and Levinson (1987:131) include the following: 1. Be conventionally indirect, 2. Question, hedge, 3. Be pessimistic, 4. Minimize the imposition FTA, 5. Give deference, 6. Apologize, 7. Impersonalize (S) and (H), 8. State the FT A as a general rule, 9. Nominalize, 10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting (H).

To conclude, Brown and Levinson view linguistic politeness as a formal, deductive and predictive system. As they claim (1987:85), it finds both senses of 'generative' applicable (i.e. as the image of a dynamo and the quasi-mathematical sense of precise and explicit description). It is a deductive system with axioms and rules of inference (distinct from rules of deductive inference). Given a set of goals, one can derive in this system *means* (i.e. strategies) that will achieve those goals.

Critique of B&L theory of politeness

The critique of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory has been summarized in various works (Kasper (1990); Thomas (1995); Escandell-Vidal (1996); Watts et al. (1992); Meier (1995)). This section addresses two criticisms that appear to be the most important.

A number of linguists undermine the universality of Politeness Principles. This criticism seems to have originated in Wierzbicka (1985), later to be followed by many others: Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1994), Liao (1994), Janney and Arndt (1993), Chen (1993), Kasper (1990), Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993), Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984), Wierzbicka (1991), Watts *et al.* (1992), to name a few.

The second criticism of B&L is that their distinction between negative politeness and positive politeness is dubious (Meier 1995:384). This problem, according to Meier (1995:385), has arisen from the fact that Brown and Levinson categorize many FTA's as threatening both negative and positive face.

Moreover, Kopytko (1993) views Brown and Levinson' s theory as a system in which the concepts such as *face, rationality, reductionism* and *context* are vague and indeterminate in nature, thus, it would be wishful thinking to claim

that it is possible, at least theoretically, to formulate a deterministic theory based on those notions. A more realistic view, and still very ambitious, would be to claim that pragmatic phenomena (including linguistic politeness) although, clearly, indeterministic in character, achieve some kind of 'probabilistic tendency', especially, when analyzed as the properties of speech communities rather than those of individual speakers (Kopytko 1993).

Culpeper (1996) attempts to build an impoliteness framework which is parallel but opposite to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. Each of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness superstrategies has its opposite impoliteness super-strategy. They are opposite in terms of orientation to face. Instead of enhancing or supporting face, impoliteness superstrategies are a means of attacking face.

Chen (2001) proposes a model of self-politeness theory which is an addition to Brown and Levinson's theory. In other words, it fills a void left by their approach so that the theory of politeness becomes complete. Thus, the theory of politeness is a kind of dichotomy: other-politeness and self-politeness. To postulate this, however, Chen (2001) offers a defense of Brown and Levinson's framework, arguing that their theory is fundamentally correct and is still the best tool in the investigation of politeness – as an analytical tool rather than as a dogmatic picture of reality.

The conversational-contract view

The fourth approach to politeness is that presented by Fraser (1975), Fraser and Nolen (1981). While also adopting Grice's notion of a Cooperative Principle in its general sense (as quoted above), and while recognizing the importance of Goffman's (1967) notion of face, this approach differs in certain important ways from that of Brown and Levinson's (1987).

In the conversational-contract view each party brings into a conversation an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from the other(s). During the course of time, or because of a change in the context, there is always the possibility for a renegotiation of the conversational contract: the two parties may readjust just what rights and what obligations they hold towards each other.

The dimensions on which interactive participants establish rights and obligations vary greatly. Some terms of a conversational contract may be imposed through convention; they are of a general nature and apply to all ordinary conversations. Speakers, for example, are expected to take turns (subject to the specific constraints of that sub-culture), they are expected to use a mutually intelligible language, to speak sufficiently loudly for the other to hear clearly, and to speak seriously. These are seldom negotiable.

Communication of politeness within the Relevance theory, proposed by Jary (1998), is based on the views on politeness advocated by Fraser (1990). According to Fraser, politeness is more often anticipated than communicated. That is, the Brown and Levinson (1987) view is counterintuitive in that it predicts that whenever the so-called polite forms/strategies are used then an additional layer of meaning is necessarily communicated, while people's experience as conversationalists proves that polite forms often go unnoticed by the participants. To say that politeness is anticipated is, in relevance theoretic terms, to say that communicators enter a linguistic exchange with mutually manifest assumptions about what is permissible in terms of force and content.

Fraser (1990:234) also notes that the basis for Brown and Levinson's view of politeness as a message – Grice's Cooperative Principle and his Maxims of Conversation – have been challenged by Spreber and Wilson's (1986) relevance theoretic account of utterance interpretation.

Jary's (1998) account of politeness within the Relevance theory framework consists in factoring out of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model only those assumptions that are incompatible with relevance theory: speech act theory and the norm based approach to communication.

Conclusion

It seems clear that a viable theory of politeness cannot rest upon a set of rules based on social, normative behavior. What one views as polite or impolite behavior in normal interaction is subject to immediate and unique contextually-negotiated factors, thus the normative perspective should be rejected.

Finally, inasmuch as the Brown and Levinson's (1987) approach is the most fully articulated version, it seems clearly the one to be systematically challenged. For example, can what counts as 'face' be defined within a culture? Is there sound empirical evidence that their claims about the use of politeness strategies correlate with naturally occurring conversations? To what extent is there persuasive evidence that their levels (degrees) of politeness are viewed consistently by native speakers of a language? To what extent is what they take as indirectness in performance a function of a speaker's intention of politeness?

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