Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Linguistic Politeness

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Abstract

Linguistic politeness is one of the most significant underpinnings of interactional communication and social everyday life. This article reviews the most important theoretical and analytical frameworks which attempt to conceptualize politeness within and across cultures with the aim to uncover the universality of linguistic politeness.

Key words: Cross-cultural; Linguistic; Politeness

INTRODUCTION

Being a very important aspect of humans' lives, linguistic politeness has become ubiquitous in different research areas. It is the central concern of many scholars in different fields of studies including pragmatics, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, comparative/ contrastive studies and so forth. It is, therefore, no surprise to see that a single definition of linguistic politeness is by no means possible. However, although definitions abound, they happen to overlap in one aspect or another.

The universality of politeness principles has been investigated by different scholars to determine to what extent they vary or coincide from language to language and from one culture to another. The aim of this article is to present an analysis and interpretation of the different views about linguistic politeness and to establish the similarities and differences between the various conceptualisations of politeness principles in order to answer the question of whether politeness is culture-specific or reflects more universal norms.

1. LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

The simplest definition for linguistic politeness lends itself to consider and focus on its very nature. Holtgraves (2002), for example, claims that it is a vast phenomenon that lies at the intersection between linguistic, social, and cognitive processes. Therefore, it corresponds to the way one chooses and puts words together as a result of a cognitive evaluation of the social context. In other words, linguistic politeness refers to the way one employs linguistic signs in an attempt to consider and to interpret the social context of the interaction, a view supported by Kasper (2005) who also thinks of linguistic politeness as the procedure of arranging linguistic action in an attempt to adapt it to a given communicative event. Cutting (2002) also supports this idea and argues that politeness in this sense encompasses an array of choices made at the linguistic level to fulfill some communicative goals. Kerbrat-Orechioni (2005, p.29) claims that if understood as such, politeness would be "all-pervasive" and "multiform" in the course of interaction. That is to say, if politeness is seen as the linguistic expressions one picks from an array of other choices to meet certain communicative ends, then it reveals itself to take multiple forms depending on those ends as also noted by Bloomer, Griffth, and Merrison (2005, p.108): "we always have a choice of what we say or write and one of the linguist's tasks is to uncover what choice x does that choice y doesn't. Often the choices that we make differ in their social and pragmatic consequences." So, definitions of this type view linguistic politeness as a set of linguistic choices or strategies employed to achieve some goals though these goals are not well determined.

Other definitions of the concept lean towards focusing on the purposes it serves in communicative interactions. Because every linguistic interaction is inevitably a social one, interpersonal relationships have an impact on what interlocutors say, and conversational conflicts that are deemed inherent in all human interchanges happen to emerge if such relationships are not taken into account. According to Lakoff (1973), politeness is the system societies develop to lessen the friction inherent in communicative interactions; therefore, it is by no means a chaotic but rather "a strategic conflict- avoidance" that can further be "measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation" (Leech, 1980, p.109). Another purpose politeness serves is suggested by Grundy (2000) as being the degree to which a speaker's linguistic action meets the addressee's expectations as to the way it should be expressed. To phrase it differently, these definitions go beyond explaining what linguistic politeness consists of to encompass the purpose it serves, namely, systematic conflict avoidance in the form of concern and awareness for the others.

Because language use is purposeful, some scholars tend to view both the form and the purpose(s) it serves as inseparable entities and have provided definitions of the phenomenon of politeness with equal reference to both the nature (form) and the function it expresses. Politeness according to Brown (2005) is seen in terms of modifying one's language in a particular way as to consider the feelings of other interlocutors; consequently, the linguistic expression the speaker uses will take a different form than the one he would produce if he did not consider his addressee's feelings. This claim suggests that there is an interchangeable influence between the language used in a given interaction and the social relationships between the people involved in that interaction. Brown and Levinson (1987, p.281) explain how "On this view, a very considerable intentional and strategic mediation connects linguistic forms with social relationships." For them, linguistic politeness refers to the linguistic strategies the speaker uses to express his communicative intention taking into consideration his hearer's feelings and face, and the relationship between the two participants. Taking a similar stand, as Brown and Levinson, Kasper (1990) considers the "antagonism" and "danger" inherent in communication and refers to politeness as a set of optional strategies accessible to the speaker in order to reduce the risk and the aggression because:

> If societies did not devise ways to smooth over moments of conflicts and confrontation, social relationships would be difficult to establish and continue, and essential cohesion would erode. Politeness strategies are the means to preserve at least the semblance of harmony and cohesion (Lakoff, 1990, p.34).

2. THEORIES AND ANALYTICAL MODELS OF POLITENESS

Interest in linguistic politeness has resulted in a myriad of empirical studies all-over the world in an attempt to detect instances of cross-cultural differences and/or similarities. The traditional longstanding controversy over the universality of language has spread to encompass this phenomenon; consequently, many theoretical and analytical frameworks have been proposed and used to account for this claim. The importance of theories of politeness is signalled by Terkourafi (2005, p.240) who thinks that "although extensively criticized, traditional theories retained their appeal for the last twenty five years. They have provided the terminology for talking and even thinking about politeness phenomena..."

2.1 Politeness as a Set of Rules

Lakoff's (1973) work on politeness was amongst the pioneering attempts to study politeness as a pragmatic construct. Her work triggered a number of empirical researches that either confirmed or disproved her assumptions. In her view, there are some pragmatic rules that underlie the choice of linguistic expression. These rules have the same status as the rules of grammar, syntax, and semantics in one's linguistic repertoire as she states: "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" (1973, p.296).

Lakoff's assumption is that pragmatic competence encompasses two general sets of rules. The first rule, "Be clear" is a literal abidance by the Gricean conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The second rule, "Be polite", is composed of other sub-rules that represent Lakoff's own conceptualization of politeness:

• **Don't impose:** used when formal, impersonal politeness is required in formal and impersonal settings.

• **Give options**: used when informal politeness is required in informal settings.

• **Make (the hearer) feel good**: used when intimate politeness is required in more intimate relationships.

Although, in her model, Lakoff does not clearly define politeness, she conceives it as a means of avoiding conversational conflicts most often at the expense of the rule of clarity. She, however, rationalizes this assumption as follows, "Politeness usually supersedes: it is considered more important in a conversation to avoid offense than to achieve clarity. This makes sense, since in most informal conversations, actual communication of important ideas is secondary to merely reaffirming and strengthening relationships" (1973, p. 289). However, the importance attached to each rule is something that Lakoff (1973) considers to be context-bound.

Lakoff's (1973) model of politeness deals with politeness as a set of rules that were postulated to

be universal assuming the occurrence of patterns of reverberation across cultures with the possibility of detecting some instances of cross-cultural variation as far as the ordering of the rules and the priority given to each are concerned. Both claims, however, were conceived as means which steered a number of empirical investigations of politeness across different languages and cultures.

2.2 Politeness as a Set of Conversational Maxims

Leech (1983) postulates two sets of rhetorical (conversational) principles that have the potential to constrain the communicative behavior of rational interlocutors: Textual Rhetoric and Interpersonal Rhetoric, each of which is made up of sets of principles. Politeness for Leech (1983) is the means through which social equilibrium and harmonious interpersonal relationships are maintained; thus, it is dealt with within the interpersonal rhetoric as one of three constituent principles: the Conversational Principle (CP), the Politeness Principle (PP) and the Irony Principle (IP).

The IP is viewed as a secondary principle compared to the first two. It explains how a speaker with some impolite intentions may, yet, be perceived as being polite and how his interaction goals may, yet, be communicated. The CP and the PP, on the other hand, are assumed by Leech (1983) to have the same status. The CP is used to explain how an utterance may be interpreted and how indirect messages may be conveyed and inferred by a hearer. The PP with its maxims is used to account for the reason for such indirectness and the non-observance of the CP and why a particular form is preferred to another as expressed in Leech's own terms, "the PP may help to understand reasons S had for choosing the particular content and form of what he said, but usually does not help to infer S's intentions" (1983, pp. 38-39).

Although he provides no explicit definition to the notion of politeness, Leech explains it in terms of the Politeness Principle (PP). In his view, the PP is at work between two parties that he referred to as self and other considering that self stands for the speaker and the other stands for the hearer or even a third party. The PP, like the CP, contains a set of conversational maxims: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. The parallel between these two different principles is not seen only in terms of the constituents being a set of maxims, but also in the assumption that these maxims are universal. The different maxims underlying the Politeness Principle, according to Leech (1983) are explained as follows:

• Tact maxim: minimize cost to other; maximize other's benefit. (e.g., *could I interrupt you for a second? If I could, just clarify this then.*)

• Generosity maxim: minimize self-benefit; maximize cost to self. (e.g., *you relax and let me do the dishes.*)

• Approbation maxim: minimize dispraise to other; maximize praise to other. (e.g., *I know you're a genius— would you know how to solve this math problem here?*)

• Modesty maxim: minimize self-praise; maximize self-dispraise. (e.g., *Oh! I'm stupid- I didn't make a note of our lecture! Did you?*)

• Agreement maxim: minimize disagreement between self and other; maximize agreement between self and other. (e.g., *yes—yes, but if you do that- you- your tea towel's soaking and at the end of the night, nothing's getting dried.*)

• Sympathy maxim: minimise antipathy between self and other; maximise sympathy between self and other. (e.g., *I was sorry to hear about your father…*)

Leech's (1983) work has been adopted by many researchers as a suitable analytical framework for linguistic politeness phenomena within or across different languages and cultures.

2.3 Politeness as Face-Saving Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) took it for granted that politeness is basic to the maintenance of social order as it is the means through which potential disagreements and conflicts between speakers are disarmed. Attempting to establish principles for talking politely and seeking to set up some universals about this remarkable phenomenon of language usage, these theorists studied in details three unrelated languages and cultures (Tamil, spoken in South India; Tzeltl spoken by Mayan Indians; and English spoken by the British and Americans).Their study yielded interesting results, namely, the existence of extraordinary parallels in language usage as far as talking politely is concerned. These results were the starting point and the basic assumption upon which their politeness model is constructed.

In the course of communication, participants, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), are model persons (MPs) who are endowed with two universal properties: rationality and face. By rationality is meant the ability to reason from the ends to the means which achieve these ends. That is to say, any rational agent is said to be able to decide upon the ends or the goals behind his/her speech and to be able to choose the expression which best achieves these goals. The second property, face, is adopted from Goffman's (1967) notion of face and the English folk term in expressions such as "save somebody's face" and "lose somebody's face". Face is thus defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.61) and it can be respected, maintained, enhanced, saved, humiliated, or lost. It is argued by Brown and Levinson that one of the basic features of the conversational cooperation is the mutual interest of interlocutors to always attend to each other's face while speaking in order to disarm the potential disagreement between them. Face is made up of two aspects which can be restated in terms of basic face wants described by Brown & Levinson (1987, p.62) as follows.

• Negative face: the want of every 'competent member' that his actions may be unimpeded by others.

• Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.

During conversations, MPs usually hold a similar belief that their expectations and claims about their self-image or their face wants will be mutually taken into account. However, to communicate their intentions, speakers sometimes simply have no choice but to produce utterances that, by their nature, seem to threaten the other's face. Threat to face occurs when the performance of a given speech act results either in impeding the addressee's freedom of action by imposing on them or in disregarding the addressee's desires, wants, feelings, opinions…,etc. These speech acts are called face threatening acts or FTAs (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p.65). Examples of the sort include orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, warnings, offers, promises, compliments, expressions of envy or admiration, disapprovals, criticisms, accusations, insults, contradictions, disagreements, etc.)

As such, a rational speaker will have three choices available to him: either to perform the act with maximum proficiency, or to modify the speech as to reduce any possible threat, or to avoid performing the FTA altogether. Brown and Levinson (1987), accordingly, suggest five different ways for performing a face threatening act referred to as politeness strategies (pp.68-70). These strategies are arranged hierarchically from the most polite to the least polite and are as follows explained with some examples from Yule (2006).

• Do not do the FTA (the most face saving option; the most polite): is a choice which may be opted for by a speaker when he feels that there is a serious risk of face loss (his own or H's). Instead, the speaker may get his intention communicated para-linguistically i.e. using other ways rather than words like gestures, facial expressions and non-verbal actions for instance searching for a pen in your bag without saying anything.

• Do the FTA off record (in the form of implicatures flouting Grice's maxims): in an attempt to produce the least possible face-threat, the speaker may carefully phrase his risky utterances in the most indirect and ambiguous way possible, leaving the floor for his addressee to grasp his intention and respond accordingly. (e.g., *Uh, I forgot my pen. / Hmm I wonder where I put my pen).*

• Do the FTA with negative politeness (with redressive action stressing the negative face), the face-threat is reduced in a way as to preserve the hearer's negative face, his basic claim to territories and his want that his actions will be unimpeded and free from any imposition the speaker's utterance might imply. Redress in this case often takes the form of questions with model verbs (e.g., could, would…), expressions of apologies for the imposition, hesitations and impersonalizing mechanics such as the use of passives. (e.g., *I'm sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a pen or something?)*

• Do the FTA with Positive politeness (with redressive action stressing the positive face) A speaker performs an FTA using a ***positive politeness*** strategy when he decides to attend to his hearer's positive face showing consideration for the positive self-image he claims for himself. This takes place especially by seeking friendship with H, by treating H as an in-group member or a person whose wants and personality boundaries are identified and desired. (e.g., *How about letting me use your pen?)*

• Do the FTA baldly on record (the least polite strategy with no redressive action adhering to Grice's CP): a speaker is said to go baldly on record whenever he decides to perform the act with maximum proficiency without the least intention to minimize the face-threat. (e.g., *Give me a pen. / Lend me a pen.)*

The choice from these strategies is determined by a consideration and evaluation of three variables: the distance between the interlocutors, the relative power of one over another, and the weight of imposition implicit in the to-be-performed act. Implicit in this model, is the idea that people do not always say what they need/ have to say but still they can communicate their intentions in a way that, at the same time, manage to make them seem polite and to preserve their faces.

Although it dates back to 1978 (1987 in a more elaborated version), Brown and Levinson's work is still triggering a huge number of empirical research. Because it was mainly based on empirical facts and because of its explication, many researchers have used it as a model to deal with different politeness phenomena. The main phenomena dealt with applying this analytical framework were: the universality of face as basic negative and positive wants, the universality of the politeness strategies and their precise ordering from the most polite to the least polite, the indirectness assumed to be associated with higher apparently polite strategies, etc.

3. LINGUISTIC POLITENESS UNIVERSALITY: MYTH OR REALITY?

The need for linguistic politeness as the steer which guides social interaction and maintains social equilibrium is no doubt a universal need which applies for all cultures. However, universality may be too-strong a claim for how it is conceptualized and manifested from one culture to another. Many researchers have set as their interest the search for patterns of cross-cultural differences as far as different politeness phenomena are concerned. Brown & Levinson's concept of face has by far been the most investigated aspect. For many researchers, especially those taking an Asian stance, what constitutes face in Brown & Levinson's view does apply for western societies but not for Asian ones (e.g., Matsumoto, 1987). Although 'positive face' has been partially accepted, 'negative face' as the claim for freedom from imposition is not equally

important for Asian people who prefer emphasizing the recognition of interpersonal relation instead. Matsumoto's conclusion is that the constituents of face are cultural specific. Politeness strategies and their hierarchy are another major area of cross-cultural politeness research. Many studies were conducted to investigate the preferences of people from different cultural backgrounds for one strategy over another focusing especially on positive politeness as opposed to the negative one. The findings of such investigations resulted in a cross-cultural division dubbing some cultures like the British and Japanese as negative cultures and others like American and Spanish as positive cultures (Sifianou, 1992; Hikey & Varquez Orta, 1996; Marquez Reiter, 2000) However, this gave rise to extra counterclaims for the universality of politeness strategies hierarchy. Since positive politeness is preferred sometimes to negative politeness, this means that the strategies are ordered differently from one culture to another. Holtgraves (2002), however, asserts that there is a partial support for the ordering in the speech act of request. Related researches tackle the correlation which exists between politeness and indirectness and claim that, for some cultures, talking in the most direct way is more polite than giving hints. Ogiermann (2009a), for example, asserts that direct requests are the most frequently used in polish and Russian while indirect requests are often used in English and German. In a similar stance, Blum-Kulcka who compared polite behavior from English and Hebrew perspectives concludes that, in Hebrew, "lengthening the inferential path beyond reasonable limits increases the degree of imposition and hence decreases the level of politeness" (1987, p.132). This may be true for Arabs as well (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Other controversies are about the impact of the social variables proposed by B& L as necessary for the strategy choice. Reporting on a number of previous investigations about the realization of requests, Holtgraves (2002) states that consistent effects have been found for both social power and rank of imposition with increasing levels of politeness associated with increasing levels of both variables. However, he notes that the social distance variable is the most troublesome one with varying results across cultures. Likewise, reviewing researches about the impact of these variables across a number of languages and cultures, Ogiermann (2009b, p.34) draws the conclusion that "The cross-cultural differences in the perception of social power and social distance suggest that it is not only their assessment which varies across cultures, but also that their underlying concepts are culture-specific."

In conclusion, one would say that politeness is neither a typical instance of the universality of language use nor an inflexible cultural property. Otherwise, how on the one hand, would one explain that people sometimes succeed to understand each other and communicate with people from other cultures? And how would one explain cross-cultural communication breakdowns on the other hand? Linguistic politeness universality is a matter of relativity.

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