

## Politeness Principle in Human Communication

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### Abstract

In human communication, politeness is very important. It is a key point in enhancing the interpersonal relationship and communication. The Politeness Principle plays an important role in human communication. If people can obey this principle, they can make their expression more tactful; whereas, if people violate the Politeness Principle, they may not make the hearers feel good. This paper will first give an analysis and explanation of the Politeness Principle with some examples. Then it will illustrate the application of the Politeness Principle through the relationship between Politeness Principle and the Cooperative Principle. At last, the paper will elaborate its application in daily life. It aims to prompt people to apply the Politeness Principle in the interaction in order to get a successful communication.

**Key words:** Politeness Principle; Cooperative Principle; Application

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### 1. THE POLITENESS PRINCIPLE

Politeness is one of the major social constraints on human interaction regulating participants' communicative consideration the feelings of the others. It is usually regarded as manifestation of human civilization, and it is one of the most effective strategies modulating interpersonal relationship in human communication.

The Politeness Principle was put forward by P. Brown and S. Levinson, and then was specified by G. Leech. The functions of Politeness Principle lie in it prompts speaker to express himself politely, honestly, makes the two sides feel respected and gets the good impression from the other.

The Politeness Principle may be formulated in a general way from two aspects: to minimize the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize the expression of polite beliefs. The term, self and other, are used in the maxims which make up the Politeness Principle, for politeness concerns the relationship between two participants. In a conversation, self will normally be identified with the speaker and other will typically be identified with the hearer, but other may also be applied to a third party, present or absent. Leech's maxims of the Politeness Principle tend to go in pairs as follows:

a. Tact Maxim: minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other. For example, a: How about having a cup of coffee? b: May I have the honor to have a cup of coffee with you? From these two sentences, we can see that b makes the hearer get more benefit, so having a high level of politeness. Otherwise, if an act imposes much on the part of hearer, the choice for hearer may be less, so this utterance is impolite. Take another example, Diner: There is something wrong with these hot dogs. Waiter: Well, don't tell it to me, I am only a waiter, not a veterinarian. In this dialogue, the waiter doesn't leave room for the customer, making no benefit to the customer, even a threatening act.

b. Generosity Maxim: minimize benefit to self, maximize cost to self. For example, A: A cup of tea. B: A cup of tea, please. C: Could you give a cup of tea, please? The politeness in these three sentences changes gradually from cost to the hearer to benefit to the hearer and hence from less polite become more polite to the hearer. The utterance of A sounds crude, possibly being refused. The utterance of B sounds a little kind, making the hearer get the benefit more or less. C maximizes the cost of himself, making

the hearer feel glad to give the tea to the speaker. Another example, A: What time is it, please? B: I am not here to tell you the time. In this dialogue, A minimizes benefit to himself, leaving room for the hearer, and making the hearer feeling friendly. But B doesn't leave room for A, refusing directly, making the cost of A, not corresponding with Politeness Principle, which should be avoided in our communication.

c. *Approbation Maxim*: minimize dispraise of other, maximize praise of other. This maxim makes the hearer as the departure point, involving the speaker's judgment and criticism. For example, A: What do you think of my new hair style? B1: How could it be so ugly! B2: Just so so. B3: It is so beautiful, and this is just the one I like. From these three judgments, B1 violates the approbation maxim, because he dispraises A, which will lower the favorable impression to B1. Although B2 doesn't dispraise directly, he still lacks of approbation. Only B3 doesn't dispraise A, but praise as possible. This kind of utterance is popular in communication.

d. *Modesty Maxim*: minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self. This submaxim makes the speaker as the starting point, boasting is impolite, so dispraising self is more polite. For example, 甲: 听说你找的工作不错呀! 乙: 哪里哪里, 一般吧。Although in this dialogue, the answer of 乙 is 哪里哪里, it doesn't mean his job is not good, he is just to try to dispraise himself to be polite to 甲. It is easy to understand for Chinese people. But if a westerner hears that, he may think that that job is not so good. Because when a westerner is praised, his answer is "Thank you." So we should combine the hearer's culture with speaker's when communicating.

e. *Agreement Maxim*: minimize disagreement between self and other, maximize agreement between self and other. This maxim pays close attention to whether the opinion of speaker is in accordance with the hearer's. If it is kept in accordance, the agreement maxim is observed. For example, A: How about going to swim today? B1: I am so tired, can't you doing something more relaxed? B2: That' OK, if there is nothing else to do. B3: Great, I like swimming most. In this case, B1 shows his disagreement directly. Although B2 doesn't show disagreement directly, he still doesn't agree, either. Only B3 increase the agreement between them, which belongs to politeness. Of course, we can't always agree with others, sometimes we should give our own opinions. When we have to disagree with others, we can use euphemism or humorous language to reduce the unpleasant and disagreement. For example, Father said you can get rid of money faster than any man I know. Son answered true, dad, but listen. By getting rid of it quickly I save lots of time and time is money. Although this dialogue is a joke, the son answered it in a humorous way to avoid refuting directly. This is a wise choice.

f. *Sympathy Maxim*; minimize antipathy between self and other, maximize sympathy between self and other. This maxim involves the relationship between the speaker

and hearer, especially the psychological feeling. For example, A: I have caught a cold these two days. B1: I know, you went to swim several days before, so you caught a cold. B2: How didn't you take good care of yourself? B3: You'd better have a rest these days. In these answers, A didn't get the sympathy which he wanted from B1 and B2, only got the blame, which made him feel antipathy. While B3 showed his sympathy and his answer was more polite.

In my point of view, the main difference between the above maxims lies in the degree of emphasis of the speaker and hearer. Then I will discuss them in pairs.

For example, tact maxim and generosity maxim are the two sides of the same issue. The former applies to requesting, because it is about the others. The latter applies to offering help, because it is about the self. Among these maxims, tact maxim and generosity maxim have a high requirement for politeness. These two are widely used in the communication. Other maxims can be regarded the concrete application in different types of utterance act. So in the following sentences, sentence A is more polite than B. A: Could you lend me your car just for this weekend? B: Lend me your car for this weekend.

Similarly, approbation maxim and modesty maxim are also the two sides of the same issue. The former stipulates how people treat others, for example: Your composition is really well written. While the latter stipulates how people treat the self, for example: A: Your new coat is beautiful. B1: Thank you. My friend sent it to me. B2: Yes I think so. B3: No, not beautiful at all. From the above answers, B1 is the most appropriate one. He not only obeys the modesty maxim, but also answers the praise politely. But B2 is sort of boasting, not polite. B3 is a typical example of cultural negative transfer. He is modest and self-dispraise. Moreover, when someone is worth praising but doesn't get the deserved praising, which means the implicature is sort of criticism.

Both agreement maxim and sympathy maxim emphasize the communicators. The two submaxims of agreement maxim agree with each other in nature. In order to obey the agreement maxim, the hearer may use some sentences of apology. For example, I am sorry, I am afraid, etc or some euphemism. Take another example, A: Tom and Mike are good at singing. B: Yes, Tom is. In this dialogue, even if Mike doesn't sing well, B doesn't negate A directly, but to express his idea through affirming Tom and not referring Mike. Another example, A: My friend died. B1: I am sorry to hear that. B2: I am sorry to hear your friend killed himself. B1 shows the sympathy maxim, and uses a simple sentence to express his feeling. But B2 doesn't obey this maxim, which will make A embarrassed.

Among the six maxims, the tact maxim is the most essential and important one, because it is mainly applied to directive, commissive utterance, which are the kinds of linguistic behavior that most embody politeness in communication, and hence need politeness most. The

tact maxim is the basis of the Politeness Principle and most widely used in communication. Using language in a polite way means that we should use it tactfully and appropriately.

## 2. POLITENESS PRINCIPLE AND COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

In communication, both Politeness Principle and Cooperative Principle play important roles. While sometimes it is not difficult to find that someone usually observe the Politeness Principle, even at the cost of violating some maxims the Cooperative Principle. That is because Politeness Principle has a higher regulative role than the Cooperative Principle.

Take an example I mentioned before, A: Tom and Mike are good at singing. B: Yes, Tom is. In this dialogue, B doesn't give a full answer for it and violates the maxim of quality of the Cooperative Principle. The implicature is that Mike doesn't sing well. The reason why he says like that is because of the politeness, and doesn't say it explicitly. Another example, A: Sam has just borrowed you car. B: Well, I like that. The answer of B is ironic. It violates the quality maxim. The implicature is that I hate lending the car to him. B doesn't express this directly in order to obey the Politeness Principle. A: Where is your mom? B: She is either in the house or the mall. In fact, B doesn't know where his mom is, but he doesn't say he doesn't know out of politeness. But he violates the relation maxim because his answer is ambivalence.

Take my friend's case as an example. In a foreign language class, the foreign teacher gave the students a topic needs to be discussed. The students were divided into several groups and discussed the topic. The foreign teacher would come to the students to listen to our discussion attentively and sometimes would join us. During the discussion, my friend sometimes discussed in the native language, that is, Chinese. Later, when the teacher approaching to us, he heard that my friend speaking in Chinese, so he asked what language you were speaking. My friend blushed, and said sorry. Then the teacher went away. Obviously, the teacher's question was not intended to be an inquiry for information but a request to speak English, because in the foreign language class, students should speak English. It was for the purpose of politeness that the teacher violated the quality maxim, because he knew what the language my friend was speaking.

When people are more concerned about the exchange of information, in this situation, the Politeness Principle will often give way to the Cooperative Principle. It is clear that between the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle there lies a relation of mutual challenge and concession when they are in confliction. In another word, if more emphasis is laid on the Cooperative

Principle, then less consideration will be given to the Politeness Principle. Similarly, more consideration of the Politeness Principle will result in less consideration of the Cooperative Principle.

## 3. THE APPLICATION OF THE POLITENESS PRINCIPLE IN THE DAILY LIFE

The Politeness Principle is widely used in our daily life. One of its applications is to explain why some utterances are more easily to be accepted than others.

According to the tact maxim, the utterance which makes the hearer cost to a large extent is said to indirect, and the utterance is more polite. For example, A: Close the door. B: Could you please close the door? B is more polite. Conversely, if the utterance is benefit to the hearer, it is more direct and polite. For example, A: Have another apple. B: Could you possibly have another apple? A is more polite.

According to the approbation maxim, some forms are deserved to be praised. E.g. What a delicious cake you cooked. While some forms should be avoided. E.g. What an awful cake you cooked. So understatement is popular, because it can reveal the implicature which the speaker isn't willing to dispraise the hearer. E.g. Her writing was not so good as it might have been.

According to the modesty maxim, the following A is popular, B makes people feel unpleasant. A: How stupid of me. B: How clever of me.

According to the agreement maxim, both the speaker and hearer tend to exaggerate their common points, even if there is difference between them. For example, A: The book is very well written. B: Yes, well written as a whole, but there are some boring chapters, don't you think?

Take some examples which often occur in our daily life. When we ask a stranger for directions, we feel we are bothering this person and therefore, we will start with "Excuse me", and say "Excuse me, can you tell the way to ". In this way, the person doesn't need to feel he is obliged to tell you the way and you have expressed that you are sorry to disturb him. When we feel we are giving orders or making requests, we need to allow this person have an option of refusal, a chance not to comply with our order. We often do so in the form of elaborate questions, e.g. Would you mind doing me a favor? Would you be so kind as to look after my kid for a while? Sometimes, when we carry on a conversation, we often praise our partner to make him feel good, we say things like: I feel very pleased to be with you. It's so kind of you to say so.

Generally speaking, in formal occasion, the degree of politeness of utterance is high, and the degree of politeness of utterance is low in informal occasion. When someone takes a taxi hurriedly, he will use a simple sentence: Train station, please. If he says "Would you

please take me to the train station?” The driver may be confused, even respect the speaker’s motivation. In the talk between close friends, the sentence like “I beg your pardon” is not appropriate, because it is far more polite. Using “What” is just proper. So we can see that a successful communication not only require the both sides obey the Politeness Principle, but also have the sense of occasion.

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## CONCLUSION

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From the above, we can get a general idea that Politeness Principle is very important in human communication. The Politeness Principle is a set of rules which give the guidance on how to greet and request. When communicating, the speaker often offers more benefit to the hearer and leaves more cost for himself, with the purpose that both of the two sides will be respected. So we should apply it in an appropriate way to get a successful communication.

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