

POLITENESS AS DEFERENCE: A PRAGMATIC VIEW

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1. Introduction

Politeness in language has been a major concern of Anglo-American pragmatics in the 1970s and 1980s. Although there exists a vast body of literature documenting cross-cultural differences in politeness, some researchers have preferred to focus on universals, and have produced both evidence and theories in support of the existence of such, predominantly in the field of politeness. The main proponents of theories of cross-cultural politeness universals are Grice, Lakoff, and Leech as well as Brown and Levinson.

Current treatments of politeness assume a *universal* set of human "face wants": people have "positive face" - they want to be liked, understood, admired, etc.- and "negative face"- they do not want to be impeded by others. It is generally in everyone's interests that face should be protected. Politeness is seen in terms of sets of strategies on the part of discourse participants for mitigating speech acts which are potentially threatening to their own "face" or that of an interlocutor. This account is typical of pragmatics in seeing language-use as shaped by the intentions of the individuals involved.

There are other linguists who also take a pragmatic view, but look for cultural differences in the expression of politeness. However, even those who argue in favour of the greater effect of cross-cultural differences acknowledge the existence of universals. Wolfson (1983), for example, points out that all languages use address forms. Ferguson (1976) suggest that all languages make use of "politeness formulas" and that politeness itself is probably universal.

The thesis of universality in politeness is the most predominant, and is accepted, to a greater or lesser extent, even by those who criticize it in principle.

2 Politeness and strategic interaction

The strongest case for cross-cultural universals is made by Brown and Levinson (1987), in a revised version of a paper first published in 1978. Because of the definitive nature of their work and the wide response it has elicited from other sociolinguists and discourse analysts, their theoretical framework will now be described and discussed in detail.

Brown and Levinson's starting point is "the extraordinary parallelism in the linguistic minutiae of the utterances with which persons choose to express themselves in quite unrelated languages and cultures".

Their main aim is to describe and account for this parallelism, and they set about achieving it by providing evidence from three unrelated languages (British and American English, Tamil and Tzeltal) the language spoken by Mayan Indians in Chiapas, Mexico), hence proposing a theory of politeness in which specific linguistic devices universally form the realisations of underlying politeness strategies.

In order to account for the systematic elements that they have observed in language use, Brown and Levinson construct a Model Person (MP). An MP, we are told, consists of a fluent speaker of a

natural language who is endowed with the properties of *rationality* (the ability to reason from ends to the means that will achieve them) and *face*.

2. 1. The notion of “face”: Presentation of Self.

Sociologists like Mead (1962) and Goffman (1967) claim that the self has no reality of its own but only in as much as it is displayed through social interaction. People come to a definition of their own selves through the responses of others. Therefore, the interest of the participants to achieve the highest possible degree of interactional coordination is not only due to a need to communicate certain information but also to construct a desirable self. Scollon and Scollon (1981) use the concept of presentation of self as one of the aspects of discourse to be taken into account when analysing it. In doing this, they are just retaking the concept of “face” first suggested by Goffman (1967) and later interpreted by Brown and Levinson (1978:66; 1987).

The concept of “face” is central to Brown and Levinson’s theory. Their interpretation of the term derives both from Goffman (1967) and from the English folk terms “losing face” (being humiliated) and “saving face” (being saved from humiliation). Brown and Levinson claim that face is made up of two constituents: positive face and negative face. Broadly speaking, a person’s positive face consists of the desire to be approved of, and his or her negative face the desire not to be imposed upon. The authors consider that since everyone is vulnerable to face-loss, it is in the mutual interest of participants in a conversation to maintain one another’s face, and the motivation to do so is seen as underlying orderly communication.

However, certain acts, such as requests, criticisms or complaints, intrinsically threaten face. The authors refer to such acts as “face threatening acts”.

The seriousness of such acts can be assessed according to three variables:

the social distance (D)

the relative power (P) of speaker and hearer

the ranking of impositions (R) within a particular culture.

The actual strategy used is selected from a scale of five options, which range from:

1. "bald on record" (with no redressive action, thus conforming to Grice's Cooperative principle): "Shut the window!".

2. Positive politeness: "Shut the window, luv"

3. Negative politeness: "I wonder if you'd mind shutting the window" (using conventional indirectness)

4. "off the record": "It's cold in here" (using non-conventional indirectness).

5. "don't do the FTA".

At the two extremes (i.e. 1 and 5) politeness is rather irrelevant. Their first category of strategies is what they call "bald on record", which is employed when there is no risk involved. Redressive action is not necessary because such strategies are either performed by interactants who are on intimate terms or because the need for efficiency overrides face concerns. The second and third categories ("positive" and "negative" politeness strategies respectively) involve redressive action and attempt to satisfy the addressee's positive or negative face wants. These two sets of strategies include the majority of linguistic devices used in everyday interactions. Their fourth category of politeness strategies is called "off record". This means that the utterance used is ambiguous (formulated as a hint, for

1 Brown and Levinson criticize the characterization of behaviours described in speech act theory as "norms" and "rules", and suggest that an approach emphasizing "strategies" can better characterize the dynamism of speech acts. Yet, while their objections to the static characterization of discourse in some analysis are warranted, the strategies they propose resemble rules.

instance), and its interpretation is left to the addressee, because the risk of loss of face is great. Their fifth category includes those cases in which nothing is said because the risk is prohibitively great.

The negative/positive politeness distinction is closely related to two of the main forms inherent in Goffman (1956: 481): “deference” and “presentational rituals”. Showing involvement and keeping distance present the two main ways of being polite to other people.

The bulk of the work is taken up with a detailed description of specific realisations of these five sets of categories, using examples from the three unrelated languages referred to above.

Fasold considers a strength of Brown and Levinson’s approach towards politeness to be their attempt to “explain politeness by deriving it from more fundamental notions of what it is to be a human being (being rational and having face wants)” (1990:161). He compares their approach favourably with those of Lakoff and Leech, who take sets of rules as their starting point (Lakoff’s rules of politeness, Leech’s maxims of the Politeness Principle) and explain politeness phenomena in terms of them, but *do not explain* why such rules should exist in the first place.

Several authors and reviewers have commented on the usefulness of various aspects of Brown and Levinson’s original framework; for example, Ferguson (1976), Lavandera (1987), Sifianou (1987), Havertake (1988) and Hickey (1991a, 1991b).

Scollon and Scollon (1983:170) state that “Brown and Levinson’s insight has been to provide us with a theoretical framework within which we can discuss the face relations between speakers as a matter of deep assumptions about the relationship that are encoded in the politeness strategies of deference and solidarity”

Hill et al. (1986) claim that their findings (in the comparison of Japanese and American requests for a pen) lend empirical support to Brown and Levinson’s hypothesis that social distance and power are two major criteria in any politeness system, and that the weighting assigned to each will vary cross-culturally.

3. Cross-cultural diversity in language use

Although such theories of the universality of language use clearly contain a certain degree of truth, many sociolinguists have expressed reservations. Saville-Troike (1982) suggests that while many functions of language are indeed universal, the way language operates in any one society to serve these functions is culture-specific.

Loveday (1982) says much the same thing in his observation that cross-cultural differences reside, not in what we do, but in how, we do it. Like others, such as Varonis (1981), Schmidt and Richards (1985), Fasold (1990), Odlin (1990), he stresses the part played by cross-cultural transfer, for example in the ways ritual formulae are used.

3. 1. Different systems of politeness

Most of those who disagree with theories of politeness systems focus their arguments on the work of Brown and Levinson (1987), since this is the most comprehensive statement of the universal case.

Criticisms of Brown and Levinson's theory concentrate on four main areas:

1. the absence of context (both situational and cultural)
2. the neglect of discourse
3. the rigidity of the politeness scale in relation to the three sociological variables (P,D, and R).
4. the universality of the concept of face and of their ranking of politeness strategies .

In this paper we will concentrate on this area. Our claim is that the universality hypothesis lacks empirical evidence, in spite of

the fact Brown and Levinson provide with sufficient data from three different languages.

3. 2. Universality of politeness strategies

The universality of Brown and Levinson's ranking of negative politeness and off-record strategies is questioned by Blum-Kulka in her study of requests in Hebrew. She argues that for Israelis "a certain adherence to the pragmatic clarity of the message is an essential part of politeness", and therefore that "lengthening the inferential path beyond "reasonable limits" increases the degree of imposition and hence decreases the level of politeness" (1987: 132). Hence, in Israeli society at least, a hint made to a superior receives a lower politeness rating than a more direct request. Brown and Levinson discuss Blum-Kulka's findings in the introduction to the second edition of their book, and conclude that this "efficiency factor" only operates in societies which place a high value on a superior's time (1987:19). This is borne out in the case of Arabs, who place rather less value on a superior's time than do the Israelis, and whose politeness strategies are correspondingly longer-winded.

Some critics of Brown and Levinson's theory of universal politeness contend that their politeness scale is inaccurate. Scollon and Scollon (1983) suggest that positive politeness is relevant to all aspects of a person's positive face, whereas negative politeness is FTA-specific. Thus, negative politeness serves to redress the threat of a particular FTA, while positive politeness has a more general redressive function. Since positive and negative politeness appear to emanate from different intentions, Coupland, Grainger and Coupland argue that Brown and Levinson's politeness hierarchy appears to be threatened, and that we should "be content with recognising overlapping set of face-related strategies" rather than holding out for a ranking of the five sets of strategies (1988:225).

Another failing in terms of universal application of the theory is Brown and Levinson's restriction of the notion of politeness to situations where there is some sort of threat (see Lavandera 1987). Thus, they neglect the fact that politeness is a permanent component of all speech acts. The problem is highlighted in the study of cultures which have an extensive system of honorifics. For example, any theory of politeness should be able to account for the fact that Japanese has no forms of expression unmarked for politeness, even in totally non-threatening situations such as giving the weather forecast on the television. Thus, although they put forward a strong case for politeness strategies as a universal means of saving face, Brown and Levinson's theory of universal politeness appears not to be watertight when examined in detail from the viewpoints of members of different cultural communities. Indeed, during the years following the publication of their original edition, evidence both theoretical and empirical, demonstrating the extent of cross-cultural diversity in politeness systems, has been accumulating. In particular, much has been written about cross-cultural transfer of politeness rules and the way in which miscommunication may occur. The studies cited below are all supported by firm evidence drawn from a range of cultures.

3. 3. Cross-cultural transfer of politeness

Clyne (1977) demonstrates the significant part played in cross-cultural communication breakdown by inadequate pragmatic transfer from one culture to another. He later (1983) expands on this theme, by providing a comprehensive list of the rules of communicative competence which vary according to culture. He divides his list into "General rules" which express broad aspects of a culture and its institutions, such as rules governing the situations in which particular speech acts are considered relevant, or in which terms of address are considered appropriate within relationships, and "Specific rules", or individual formulae for speech acts, such as the

different formulae employed for similar speech acts. Every item on the two lists is then verified by means of a cross-cultural questionnaire.

Wolfson speaks of "the sort of miscommunication which occurs when people transfer the rules of their own native speech communities to what seems to them to be a corresponding situation in a new speech community". She points out that speakers are "quite unconscious of the patterned nature of their own speech behaviour and generally unaware that quite different norms and patterns are likely to prevail in other societies" (1983:62).

Thomas (1983) divides cross-cultural miscommunication into "pragmatic failure", which may result from the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies through a misconception of their illocutionary force in the second language, and "sociopragmatic failure", (this term borrowed from Leech 1983), which may result from cross-cultural differences in "the social conditions placed on language in use", such as differences in what constitute free and non-free goods in a society, or what is considered to be taboo.

Richards and Sukwiat consider "the effects of transfer of native-language conversational conventions into target-language conversational discourse" which occurs because "culturally specific assumptions and strategies for conversation surface in cross-cultural encounters" (1985:129). They describe, for example, how the same situation may call for different routines in different cultures (e.g. a compliment may be acknowledged with thanks in English, but with silence or an apology in other cultures such as Thai), or how the same routines may have a different function (a Japanese person will say *I am sorry* where an English person would say *Thank you*).

Haverkate expands on the case of the use of different routines in different cultures in the same situation in relation to thanking and making offers. He points out, for example, that "many Dutch tourists with some elementary knowledge of Spanish, do know how to thank when they are in Spain, but not when to thank" (1988:392).

Richards and Sukwiwat, here in close agreement with Brown and Levinson's thesis, point out that an identical transaction will be subject to cross-cultural variation in terms of its "face costs", that is, the degree of threat perceived to be involved for the interlocutors. They argue that such variation is transferred to second language situations, resulting in the use of the wrong degree of directness or indirectness, such as the use of indirect strategies in situations where a native speaker would perceive no potential threat to face.

Blum-Kulka (1987), moreover, argues that "indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness" in all cultures. She considers that while there is a link between politeness and indirectness where conventional indirectness (Brown and Levinson's "negative politeness" category) is involved, for native speakers of both Hebrew and English, this is not the case for non-conventional indirectness (Brown and Levinson's "off-record" strategy) for native speakers of Hebrew, particularly where a hearer of superior position is concerned. As mentioned earlier, for Israelis, she claims, "a certain adherence to the pragmatic clarity of the message is an essential part of politeness" (1987:141).

Thus, norms of politeness may differ from one culture to another, and in their efforts to be polite in a second language, non-native speakers are likely to transfer politeness strategies from their own to the target culture. Where such transfer leads to the use of an indirect strategy in a routine where a direct one would be more appropriate, the non-native speaker may, paradoxically, appear less polite. The problem is compounded by the fact that conventionally indirect politeness strategies tend to be syntactically more complex and therefore lengthier than direct strategies (Carrell et al. 1981) and that a deviation from native-speaker norms of length of utterance, particularly where an utterance is lengthened, may lead to pragmatic failure (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1986). It is suggested (*ibid.*) that non-native speakers lengthen their utterances through lack of confidence in their ability to convey their message concisely. Thus, when non-native speakers inappropriately select an indirect strategy, either as a result of transfer from their own culture with the

intention of sounding polite, or within the terms of the target language in an effort to be better understood, they may in fact achieve the opposite effect on both counts.

4. A reassessment of Brown and Levinson's theories

In spite of the convincing objections and criticisms mentioned, Brown and Levinson's work still remains an invaluable and comprehensive source for the concept of politeness. They do allow for a certain degree of cross-cultural variation, which they call "ethos" and define as "the affective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society" (1978: 248). Their distinction between positive and negative politeness strategies, whether mixed and multifunctional or not, and the subsequent differentiation between positive and negative politeness societies can shed very considerable light on differences between cultures and provide a secure basis for their investigation. However, Brown and Levinson claim that:

we cannot account for cultural differences in terms, say, of greater desire for positive-face satisfaction than negative-face satisfaction in some society (in the U.S.A. compared with England . for example). Note that if we allowed extrinsic weighting of face wants, then cultural (emic) explanations of cross-cultural differences would supersede explanation in terms of universal (etic) social dimensions like D (distance) and P (power) (1978: 249).

Their justification, however, does not appear to be adequate. If emic explanations can account better for the phenomena under investigation, why should we discard them in favour of etic explanations? Apart from this, Brown and Levinson themselves established the two components of face. They seem, however, to ignore the positive aspect of politeness altogether, the solidarity aspect, and concentrate on the negative side, the deference aspect,

which shows an ethnocentric view of the concept of face. The greater desire for the satisfaction of a particular aspect of face cannot be a superficial preference, as Brown and Levinson seem to imply, but a choice deeply ingrained in the specific system of values predominant in the particular society. In some cultures, face-satisfying acts are more important than just face-threatening acts. This is an essential element and not something that can be easily overlooked.

Moreover, social dimensions like vertical and horizontal distance and rate of impositions may be universal, but they are variably defined interculturally, deriving their weight from basic cultural values.

As Triandis and Triandis (1970: 178) point out, every society has established norms which determine the social distance that is seen as "correct" between various classes of people. Moreover, as Brown and Levinson (1978:253) themselves recognize, "the actual factors that go into assessing the size of these three social variables are of course culturally specific (with even some leeway for idiosyncratic variation)". If these variables are culture specific, as is the content of face itself, then all these considerations determine to a great extent the type of politeness that will prevail in that society.

I am not implying here either that all societies or that societies as a whole can be clearly categorized as being either positively or negatively polite. It may be true that the theory is in need of modification (Matsumoto 1988) in order to become a model of universal applicability, and it is also clear that no society is likely to be completely uniform in its politeness. It is obviously true, as Brown and Levinson point out (1978: 175) that complex, stratified societies will exhibit both kinds of politeness, with perhaps upper classes having a negative politeness ethos and lower classes a positive politeness ethos.

5. Spanish culture and the notion of face

Brown and Levinson suggest that the origin of politeness strategies is the same in all societies. All human beings, in order to

enter into social relationships with each other, must acknowledge the face of other people. By this they mean that people both avoid intruding upon each other's territory and also seek to enlarge the territory of others, presumably on the assumption that the same will be done to them. The specific nature of face varies from society to society. Though their realizations differ, the two, often conflicting aims of communication -to cooperate and to maintain social relations- are universal.

Brown and Levinson (1978: 66-67) say that, although the notion is universal, the exact content of face will differ in different cultures, and they elaborate on this by saying that there will be differences as to the exact limits to personal territories, and to the publicly relevant content of personality. Notions of face are closely related to some of "the most fundamental cultural ideas about the nature of the social persona, honour and virtue, shame and redemption and thus to religious concepts" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 13).

We can distinguish societies according to the ethos predominant in daily interactions, both verbal and non-verbal. In this sense then, it is true to say that these societies, for which the distinction is applicable, cannot be distinguished as either absolutely positive or absolutely negative, but rather as relatively more positive or relatively more negative, according to the type of ethos which is given more play. And this is what I mean when I talk of positive and negative politeness societies.

The notion of *face*, consisting of two aspects of approval and non-imposition, seems to account for the motivation of politeness phenomena in Spanish and to explain the differences between Spanish and English. I suggest that the fundamental difference between the two politeness systems can be explained in terms of differences in the significance attached to the two components of face. The English seem to place a higher value on privacy and individuality, i.e. the negative aspect of face, whereas the Spaniards seem to emphasize involvement and in-group relations, i. e. the

positive aspect. For Spaniards the limits to personal territories seem to be looser among the individuals who belong to the same in-group². The barriers which have to be removed to establish social relations are not so high as in Britain and for this reason territorial intrusion in Spain is measured on a different basis in England.

Furthermore, the notion of *face* among Spaniards seems to include, not only the desire of a person to be appreciated, liked and approved of by at least some others, but also a strong desire that closely related associates are also appreciated, liked, and approved of by the same. The actions of every member of the in-group are most strongly reflected in the others' face. Very often the individual's needs, desires, expectations, and even actions are determined by considering those of the other members of the in-group. Face is not lost, maintained, or enhanced solely on the basis of how each individual behaves. The behaviour of other closely related members of the in-group contributes greatly to the overall picture of every individual's face.

Members of the same in-group will most often employ informality and positive politeness strategies and they will save formality and negative politeness (or no politeness at all) for member of the out-group, depending on their status.. Towards their in-group, Spaniards behave with spontaneity and enthusiasm and tend to express their feeling overtly. Members of the same in-group see it as their duty to help and support each other, both morally and financially, so they find no obvious reason for thanking or apologizing, except for something they conceive of as being very serious or beyond the normal duties of the performer of the action, since the appropriate response is similar behaviour from everybody when the occasion arises. On the verbal level, their requests and wishes, advice and suggestions are expressed structurally more directly than in English because they are not perceived to the same extent as impositions .

2 Spanish people in relation to foreigners behave as an in-group themselves

They prefer those patterns which involve what Brown and Levinson have called interactional "optimisim", such as imperatives and indicatives.

In England, on the other hand, cultural norms demand a more distant system of behaviour, where helping each other is seen more as depending on the individual's discretion rather than as conforming to a more general duty. Thus, requests are comparatively more sparingly employed, since they are perceived to a greater extent as impositions and they are preferably expressed more elaborately and indirectly. Verbalizations of thanks and apologies are imperative even for minor relevant situations and among members belonging to the same in-group. This is, I believe, a major source of misinterpretation and misjudgement which have led to negative stereotypic comments such as "The Spaniards are impolite" or "The English are hypocritical" and many others of a similar sort concerning degrees of politeness.

Summing up, it could be suggested that although positive and negative politeness interact in intricate ways, Spaniards tend to use more positive politeness devices, especially to their in-group members, as opposed to the English who seem to prefer some negative politeness devices. As Brown and Levinson contend, "in our culture, negative politeness is the most elaborate and the most conventionalized set of linguistic strategies for face threatening acts redress; it is the stuff that fills the etiquette books". They seem to imply that, in the Western world, politeness is usually associated with negative or deference strategies. In brief, all the characteristics attributed to indirectness in general and conventional indirectness in particular. But there is some evidence to show that non imposition may not be universally the most valued interactional norm; there are other norms, such as clarity in expressing intentions and a show of sincerity, which are preferred over nonimposition, and then directness will not necessarily be associated with impoliteness.

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RESUMEN

Los tratamientos actuales de la cortesía presuponen un conjunto universal de necesidades humanas de imagen: la gente tiene imagen positiva (quieren ser estimados, entendidos, admirados, etc..) e imagen negativa (no quieren ser obstaculizados por otros). La imagen debe ser universalmente protegida en interés de todos y cada uno. La cortesía se contempla como un conjunto de estrategias de los participantes en el discurso con el fin de mitigar los actos de habla que puedan ser amenazadores para su imagen o la de su interlocutor. Esta explicación es típicamente pragmática puesto que contempla el uso del lenguaje como moldeado por las intenciones de los hablantes involucrados, y parece implicar que, al menos en el mundo occidental, la cortesía se asocia con las estrategias negativas o de deferencia, en concreto, con todas las características a la indirección en general y a la indirección convencionalizada en particular. Pero existe cierta evidencia de que la no imposición puede no ser la norma interactiva más valorada; hay otras normas, tales como la claridad en la expresión de la intención y la demostración de sinceridad, que son preferidas a la no imposición, y, en esos casos, el carácter directo de una expresión no se asocia con la descortesía necesariamente

ABSTRACT

Current treatments of politeness assume a universal set of human "face wants": people have "positive face" -they want to be liked, understood, admired, etc.- and "negative face" -they do not want to be impeded by others. It is generally in everyone's interests that face should be protected. Politeness is seen in terms of sets of strategies on the part of discourse participants for mitigating speech acts which are potentially threatening to their own "face" or that of an interlocutor. This account is typical of pragmatics in seeing language-use as shaped by the intentions of the individuals involved, and it seems to imply that, at least in the Western world, politeness is usually associated with negative or deference strategies, in brief, all the characteristics attributed to indirectness in general and conventional indirectness in particular. But there is some evidence to show that non imposition may not be universally the most valued interactional norm; there are other norms, such as clarity in expressing intentions and a show of sincerity, which are preferred over non-imposition, and then directness will not necessarily be associated with impoliteness.

RÉSUMÉ

Les traitements actuels de la courtoisie présupposent un ensemble universel de besoins humains d'image: les gens ont une image positive (ils veulent être estimés, compris, admirés, etc...) et une image négative (ils ne veulent pas que d'autres lui fassent obstacle). L'image doit être universellement protégée dans l'intérêt de tous et de chacun. La courtoisie est envisagée comme un ensemble de stratégies des participants du discours afin de freiner les actes de parole pouvant menacer leur image et celle de leur interlocuteur. Cette explication est typiquement pragmatique, étant donné qu'elle contemple l'usage du langage comme modelé par les intentions des sujets parlants. et elle a l'air d'impliquer que, tout au moins dans le monde occidental, la courtoisie s'associe aux stratégies négatives, ou de déférence. en somme. avec toutes les caractéristiques à l'indirection en général et à l'indirection conventionnalisée en particulier. Mais il est clair que la non-imposition peut ne pas être la norme interactive la plus estimée; ils existe d'autres normes, telles que la clarté dans l'expression de l'intention et la démonstration de sincérité, préférées à la non-imposition, et, dans ces cas-là, le caractère direct d'une expression ne s'associe pas nécessairement au manque de courtoisie.