# Politeness: A Socio-Pragmatic Study

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# Abstract

- Theory of Politeness- formulated in 1978 and revised in 1987 by Brown and Levinson

- Politeness is interlocutors' desire to be pleasant to each other through a positive manner of addressing.

- Gist: the intention to mitigate certain face threatening acts towards others.

- Base of Politeness theory: Interlocutors have face which they consciously project, try to protect and preserve.

- Politeness strategies are used to protect the 'face' of others when addressing them.

- Positive and negative face.

- Positive: reflects desire to be approved by others

- Negative: avoids being imposed on.

- Politeness strategies differ according to face.

- Face and strategies both vary from culture to culture.

# Notion of Politeness

- Study of politeness involves various domains namely pragmatics, Stylistics, Sociolinguistics, Conversational Analysis and Ethnography of Communication.

- For some it falls within the domain of Pragmatics, while for others it is a sociolinguistic phenomenon.

- Thomas(1995) defines Politeness as a genuine desire to be pleasant to others.

- Holmes(2001) observes that being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of relationship.

- Fairclough is in line with Holmes stating that politeness is based on the recognition of differences of power, degree of social distance.

# Cooperative Principle as Basis for Politeness

- Grice's Cooperative Principle - a corner stone for the notion of politeness

- Lakoff links notion of politeness to indirectness, asserting that just as the CP explains how an addressee can understand more than is actually said from an utterance by abiding by or flouting certain maxims, CP serves as a starting point in 'Politeness rule'.

- The more clear message, the more one moves away from politeness.

- Clarity: Directness ; Politeness: Indirectness

# Theories of Politeness

- Four main approaches according to Fraser (1990)

1. Social Norm Approach

2. Conversational Contact Approach

3. Conversational Maxim Approach

4. Face-Management Approach

Some of which relate the phenomenon to pragmatics and others to sociolinguistics-supports inference that it is socio-pragmatic phenomenon.

# Social Norm Approach

- Strongly relates politeness to sociolinguistics

- Based on the notion of social norm and convention

- Standards of behavior in any society according to which addresser's politeness is measured.

- These standards are related to certain speech styles (Fraser)

- A higher degree of formality implies greater politeness

- This approach relates politeness to the whole discourse, not only to a particular utterance.

# Conversation Contact Approach

- Proposed by Fraser

- Interlocutors conduct a conversation to reach recognition of rights and obligations that govern the interaction which are negotiable, dynamic and changeable.

- The notion of rights and obligations can be related to the notion of power and social identity since they are not static. Change in social identity of interlocutor involves change in rights and obligations.

# Conversation Maxims Approach

- Based on Gricean notion of cooperative principle and its maxims
- Two major models adopt this approach
1. Lakoff's Politeness Rules
2. Leech's Politeness Principles

# Lakoff's Politeness Rules

- Lakoff ranks among the earliest scholars who dealt with the concept of politeness in relation to pragmatics

- Based on Grice's maxims distinguishes three types of politeness from a behavioral point of view

(1) Polite behavior which is clear when interlocutors follow the politeness rules, whether or not expected.

(2) Non – polite behavior which does not conform with politeness rules, where conformity is not expected.

(3) Rudeness, where politeness is not transformed, although expected.

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# Leech's Politeness Principles

- Based on Grice's maxims

- Concerned with absolute politeness, indicating that speech acts are either inherently polite or impolite, based on their illocutionary force, where order is inherently less polite than request.

- Leech (1996: 82) states that his general politeness principle is basically used to maintain social equilibrium which may be harmed by some speech acts.

- Proposes four main 'illocutionary functions', namely, competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive in correlation with social goal, stressing that the first two types mostly involve politeness:

- 1- Competitive: the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal, e.g., ordering, requesting, demanding, begging.
- 2- Convivial: the illocutionary goal coincides with the social goal, e.g., offering, inviting, greeting, thanking.
- 3- Collaborative: the illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal, e.g., asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing.
- 4- Conflictive: the illocutionary goal conflicts with the social goal, e.g., threatening, accusing, cursing

# Face – Management Approach

- Brown and Levinson's (1978, revised 1987) 'Theory of Politeness' adopts the notion of 'Face' as a basis which is a sociological term proposed by Goffman's (1955) theory of interpersonal communication.

- Brown and levinson's Theory is based on a field research on three Languages, namely, English, Tamil and Tzeltd.

- The notion of 'face' is defined by Goffman as: "The positive Social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved Social attributes". According to Goffman, the concept of 'Line' refers to conduct or behavior.

- Brown and Levinson (ibid: 66) observe 'Face' as emotionally invested, thus, can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, thus must be continuously attended to in interaction. They observe that one's face depends on others face being maintained through cooperation during an interlocution.

- Brown and Levinson's 'Face' consists of two related aspects:

1.Negative face: Represents the claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition,

2. Positive face: represents the desire for approval and appreciation, the need to connect, to belong, to be accepted as a member of the group.

# Brown and Levinson's Politeness strategies

- Brown and Levinson propose various strategies to perform the face – threatening acts (henceforth FTA) which tackle an instance when an interlocutor's statement represents a threat to another interlocutor's expectations, thus, threatens his 'face', i.e., self and public – image. In such a case the interlocutor may utter an utterance to decrease the possible threat to his / her 'face', which is labeled 'face – saving act' .

# Positive Politeness

- An addresser can perform FTA while attending to the addressee's positive 'face wants', i.e., expresses approval or support. Brown and Levinson propose 15 positive politeness strategies, some of which are as follows:

Strategy 1: Notice, attend to the addressee's needs, wants, etc.

Strategy 2: Exaggerate interest (approval, sympathy, etc.).

Strategy 3: Intensity (show interest to the addressee).

- Positive politeness strategies are not only used for FTA redress but also as a 'social accelerator' to indicate intimacy.

# Negative Politeness

- By choosing to perform FTA with a negative politeness, the addresser acknowledges that the addressee has negative face wants, i.e., having a preference not to be imposed on.

- Brown and Levinson propose 10 negative strategies. Out of which some are as follows:

Strategy 1: Be conventionally indirect.

Strategy 2: Give difference.

Strategy 3: Apologize

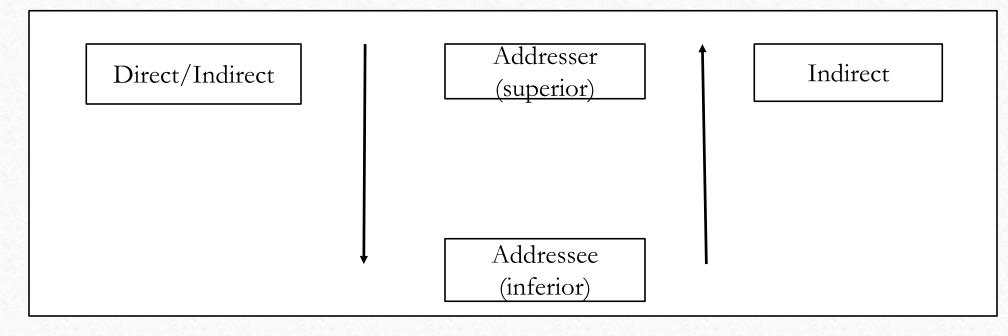Strategy 4: Impersonalize the addresser and the addressee.

# Do not do the FTA

- This strategy is adopted when the addresser decides not to threaten the addressee(s) 'face', if the threatening act is useless. Therefore, it is inferred that this is not analyzable since no utterance is performed by the addresser.

# Speech Acts as Related to the Concept of Politeness

- Generally Speaking , Searle (1975, cited in Brown and Yule, 1983: 232) distinguishes between direct and indirect Speech Acts (henceforth SAs), defining direct speech Acts as expressing their illocutionary force directly, e.g., when the addresser needs information and directly, asks the addressee to provide it:

- Example (3) – Can you close the door?

- Indirect SAs are "cases in which one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another", (Searle, ibid: 60).Yule (1996: 133) propose the following example:

- Example (4) – could you pass the salt?

- He argues that the addressee would not mistake the utterance to question his/ her physical ability, but would understand it as a request and respond to it.
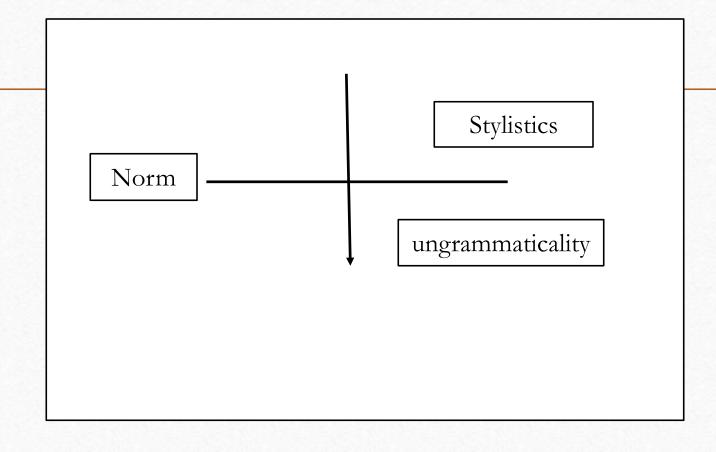
# Indirect Speech Acts

- Indirect SAs are a device mainly used to express politeness, in order to avoid the unpleasant aspects of a message expressing requests, orders, blame, etc., i.e., to avoid the sensitivity of direct utterances.

| Direct/Indirect | | Addresser (superior) | | Indirect |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ↓ | | ↑ | |
| | | Addressee (inferior) | | |

# Stylistic variation of Politeness

- Style is a variety of language which reflects the Social characteristics and the primal identity of its users as well as the relationship between the interlocutors. Styles are characterized by differences in vocabulary, grammar, and level of formality.

- Crystal (1987: 66) defines style as any "Situationally distinctive use of language – a characteristic of groups as well as individuals .. style is viewed as the set of language features that make people distinctive – the basis of their personal linguistic identity".

- To illustrate the nature of style the researcher proposes the following figure which clarifies the notion that style is above the norms of grammaticality:

Norm

Stylistics

ungrammaticality

# Levels of Formality

- Interlocutor's selection of the level of formality depends on aspects of the social and situational context and the mutual relation of the interlocutors.

# Formality

- Formal Style -Phonological precision, elaboration of Syntax and lexicon, (Brown and Fraser n.d, cited in Sherer and Giles, 1979: 46).

- Highly complex structures, consistency of language forms, well selected lexical items, use of terms of address and titles, etc. The formal style, therefore, is more prestigious and more elegant, but more complex in form.

- Beaulieu (1996: 1) observes that the high formal style is used to "impart fear and thereby gain power". Thus, in terms of social relations, formal situations are characterized by particular orientation to mark position, status and face

# Informality

- Characterized by discourses of low social prestige, which also has its effects on language forms.

- The informal style is characterized by ellipsis, repetition, simple syntactic structures, simple words, lack of terms of address or titles, use of first names and diminutives. Informal situations are characterized by equality in position/status, i.e., symmetrical and familiar relationships are overt .

# Criticism and Shortcomings of the Theory of Politeness

- Brown and Levinson's theory of Politeness has been criticized for not being universally valid by scholars involved in East – Asian Languages and cultures.

- Yule (2006: 122) observes that in East – Asian cultures, e.g., Japan, China, Thailand, etc., politeness in not achieved on the basis of volition as on discernment, or prescribed social norms.

- Status is oriented towards the need for acknowledgment of the position or roles of interlocutors as well as adherence to formality norms, which are appropriate to a particular context of situation.

- The Japanese perhaps rank among the most acknowledged examples of a language that encodes politeness at its very core. Japanese Language has two main levels of politeness, one for intimate acquaintances and the other for distant groups, where the verbs and morphology play the difference.

- Nouns, interrogative pronouns create politeness differences.

- Different personal pronouns for each person according to gender, age, rank, degree of familiarity and other factors which may not occur in other languages.

- Languages differ in politeness scales and strategies, so this refutes Brown and Levinson's proposition that politeness theory is universally valid since theory is based on three languages only.

- Does not even include the Tu/ Vous pronouns system to express deference used by some of the more polite world Languages, e.g. French, German, Italian, Spanish, etc.

- Yule (1996: 60) observes that 'Politeness' may be regarded as a fixed concept only within a particular culture, based on the norms of the politeness social behavior, which may differ from one cultural community to another. By nature, interlocutors are aware of the norms of the society.

# Conclusion

- 1. Politeness is a socio-pragmatic phenomenon.

- 2. 'Politeness Theory' is not universally valid, since languages differ in their politeness scales and strategies, which may differ from one culture to another.

- 3. Face saving forms the basis of politeness principles.

- 4. Eveyone's Face depends on the other's Face saving, to have one's Face saved in return on the basis of politeness.

- Indirectness is a device of politeness, while directness is a device of impoliteness.

- Pragmatics is concerned only with intentional indirectness.

- The social aspect of politeness is related to the social identities of the interlocutors and the relation between them, while the individual part of politeness is related to the strategic use of politeness to achieve communicative goals.

- 8. Stylistic variation and levels of formality signify the level of politeness / impoliteness.

- 9. There is a correlation between the politeness strategy used and the social identity of the addresser in the interaction.

- The use of 'positive politeness' signifies social equality; position correlates with the use of 'on record' strategy; 'negative politeness' conveys unfamiliarity and social distance; 'off record' politeness strategy implies imposition on the addressee.