Politeness Contested

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Communication is a collaborative enterprise. The choices we make in communicating messages involve an understanding of ourselves and of others. Participants in verbal interaction are quite capable of temporarily changing the nature of their behavior toward polite or impolite speech and behavior according to the exigencies of the ongoing interaction. Researchers have documented an array of politeness strategies that help minimize the potential for conflict in communication. While politeness is generally believed to be a universal phenomenon, what politeness consists of is widely contested. This paper begin by exploring the views of Lakoff (1990), and Brown and Levinson (1987), particularly addressing the notion of face and face threatening acts (FTA). It will then discuss the problems of viewing politeness on a theoretical and universal level. Mills (2003) and Watts (2003) discuss politeness at the level of agency; Mills (*ibid*) stressing personal responsibility that locates agency on a level above and beyond social norms, while Watts emphasizes the process of contesting politeness at an interpersonal level. From these different points of view, this paper will argue that a theoretical view of what constitutes politeness is contestable on a number of levels but also consider some of the reasons for understanding politeness as a necessary form of pragmatic behavior.

When we talk of politeness strategies we generally mean strategies that minimize the potential for upset that can result from such speech acts as interrupting. Take for instance the following interruption cited in a recent (2009) BBC interview: "*To interrupt you for a second sir. Just interrupt you for a second. Excuse my bad manners.*" The apology here functions to smooth over the interruption while at the same time giving the interlocutor the right to speak. In this real example, the interruption was necessary to clarify (for the audience's sake) a message, an ordinary interview procedure. Collaborating on this level of repair is common to communication and is relatively formulaic.

Japanese politeness in the public sphere consists, (not surprisingly), in not offending others. There is a tendency also to avoid direct refusal. In a (very) general sense, Japanese are also disinclined to

express strong opinions, which from Lakoff's (1990) critical perspective, debases a person as one deliberately acts in a humble manner. Linguistically, utterances are usually hedged, meaning Japanese appear to tolerate a considerable amount of ambiguity in communication (apparently relying on cultural assumptions to communicate). At the same time, Japanese verbs conjugate according to formal rules, and these correspond to formal rules of polite address. Language rules aside, as a strategy, deference works on an individual level provided that everyone wants the same thing (*ibid*). As a communication style, deference spells ambiguity and is characterized by non-commitment. In Japan, deference reinforces social norms and makes explicit formal respect for cultural activities, but also functions as a binding proof of cultural membership. Importantly, foreigners communicating in Japan are not in a position to contest these norms and are judged according to localized standards.

Camaraderie is another way of creating solidarity among groups of people. From a cross-cultural perspective, camaraderie just like deference, can appear superficial, as genuine intimacy, the distant cousin of camaraderie, takes a considerable time to develop (*ibid*). Real intimacy also differs in that it leads to the dismantling of politeness strategies (*ibid*) while camaraderie can be mistaken for privilege (ibid). Lakoff's (1990) views on politeness show at a general level what people expect out of social relationships. The two dimensions here suggest that solidarity is a major concern in communication but that there is more than one way to achieve it.

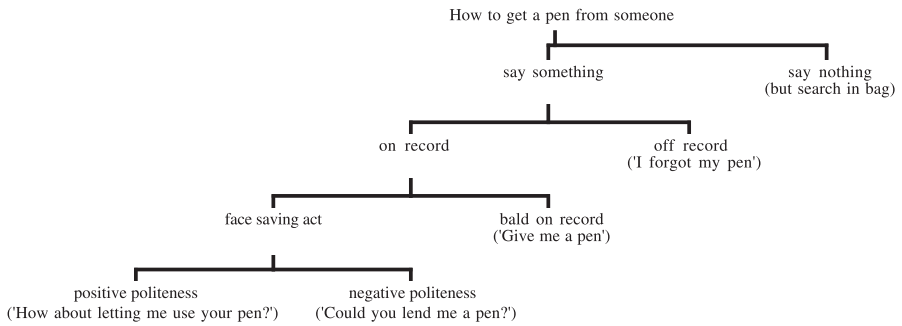
Brown and Levinson (1987) list approximately fifty strategies (too numerous to mention in detail here) that they classify along the lines of either positive or negative politeness. Positive politeness is aimed at minimizing any threat to others (by expressing solidarity) while negative politeness strategies are orientated toward recognizing an imposition. Brown and Levinson's (*ibid*) work theorizes that FTAs exist across all languages and cultures and are the result of a special sense of self-awareness and awareness of others in communication: "… certain precise parallels in many different languages can be shown to derive from certain assumptions about 'face' - individuals' self-esteem" (p. 2).

Face, a person's public self-image (Yule, 1996), arises as a result of interaction. Interaction 'presupposes the potential for aggression' (Goffman, 1981, p. 27); and even 'virtual offences' are recognized by interlocutors. In face-to-face contact people willfully present or act out a line, and

through this create a frame of reference that situates *the self* and establishes a reference point for the evaluation of *others*. This is a reciprocal evaluation. Face, of course, can be maintained or lost. In the presentation of self for instance, expressions of genuine rapport would be accompanied by a particular body language, a positive tone of voice, and affirmations, just as contempt would show up as a critical facial expression, i.e. an evaluation, that to a perceptible eye would be evident even if attempts to mask it succeeded (Ekman, 2003). Face then, is the conscious attempt to mediate communication in a purposeful way and one that serves a pragmatic purpose. Face is as much expressive as it is preemptive.

Grice (1971, cited in Brown and Levinson, 1987) posits the reason for social cohesion in the natural inclination people have toward cooperation: communication is ‘a special kind of intention designed to be recognized by the recipient’ (p. 7). But cohesion comes at the price of compromise. Interlocutors have to work out their mutual intentions (p. 8). Speakers must minimize conflict potential, simultaneously attempting to maintain a coherent message (while hearers works out these intentions). To restate the argument of this paper, politeness and face-saving strategies are attempts at?mediating potentially conflicting viewpoints in communication, allowing speakers to reach their communicative objectives. Politeness strategies may be aimed at affirming the other person's right for expression (rather than criticizing it), or aimed at expressing solidarity with them as a way of negotiating meaning.

Yule (1996) represents Brown and Levinson's (1987) five major types of strategy in a flow diagram, reiterating the idea that strategic acts are rational processes:



Strategies correspond to the weight of the FTA. Variations will occur according to the different powers (P) of speakers, the social distance between them speakers (D), and the perceived ranking of the threat (R). Brown and Levinson (1987) state this as an equation as follows:

$$Wx = P(H, S) + D(S, H) + R\ x$$

Note that the strategies range from bold on record, e.g., saying something explicitly like: 'Turn down the music,' to suggesting, "I think I'll go to bed," to, doing nothing and hoping the music will be turned down.

There are a number of criticisms of the model that are worth considering. Firstly, it is distinctively Western in that it purports to give speakers the individual right to say what they want with an expectation that negotiation is a given, a notion not maintained in all cultures (e.g., Samoa, China, and Japan where consequences of free speech would be perceived as dissent and could therefore result in alienation from the group). This raises the question whether socialization has a lot do with notions of politeness. a major concern for Japanese people would be not alienating themselves over and above the right to express an FTA that culturally would not normally be expressed. Nor is this relevant in conditions of enforced social inequality such as in legal situations or in corporate culture. Second, while the formula allows us to specify the weight of an act, it is from the model speaker's perspective (Mills, 2003), and it raises the question, how exactly can a speaker know the required information about an addressee to make this kind of 'strategic' assessment-there is no way to penetrate the mind of H and predict their evaluation of the FTA. This formula appears therefore to give the speaker (of the speech act) an omniscient view and virtually disregards what hearer's have to say in the matter.

Thirdly, from the western perspective, this universal view of what politeness strategies are, apparently strips interaction of an essentially creative/collaborative element: i.e. interlocutors have to work each-others' intentions out. Once variables are introduced, such as two people not knowing each other very well, personal orientation (*ibid*) becomes an increasingly important factor-as do cultural heterogeneity, perceived social inequalities, gender differences, educational background, socialization, communication styles, and tolerance for conflict and ambiguity.

In interaction, estimations of politeness or impoliteness constitute meta-data that are not encoded in language, and interruptions, clarifications, and misunderstandings are par for the course. Mills (2003) suggests that people may exercise the right to avoid classifying one-way or the other. 'Within all communities of practice there is conflict over meaning and over the notion of what is appropriate' (*ibid*, p. 9).

Watts' (2003) argument challenges the idea that there can be any theory of politeness and situates politeness within individual acts of interpretation. He demonstrates that what is considered polite conventionally is actually 'politic' behavior, i.e. doing what is expected—and sets out to demonstrate this by examples from formulaic language and the traditional social structures that maintain these distinctions. He maintains that it is all really a struggle over social values and their reproduction. On the other hand, "Politeness, I maintain, is used to 'pay' more than would normally be required in the ritual exchange of speech acts (*ibid*, p. 115). Politic behavior differs from politeness as it is behavior that normalizes the interaction. On the other hand, politeness may or may not be valued.

The argument continues: politeness can be theorized but this takes away an individual's right to regulate and interpret what is going on. "Ultimately, what is or is not taken to be a polite utterance depends entirely on the moment of utterance in linguistic practice and relies on the participants' *habitus* in the verbal interaction" (*ibid*, p. 200).

The Bourdieu notion of habitus (ibid) refers to 'a self' that is a product of socialization; but an identity that is situated between the recognition of norms and the natural drive and capacity to communicate efficiently. People are both sensitive to these constraints of experience and creative by nature, so able to improvise and exhibit a 'feel for the game' (*ibid*, p. 148).

As mentioned above, part of Watts' (*ibid*) argument is to point out that expressions themselves are formulaic and carry no original propositional content. These are the result of '*pragmaticization*'. These conventions are learned, which is how they guide the flow of social interaction (Goffman 1967, cited in Watts, 2003). It follows that the use of formulaic expressions (and behavior), demonstrates compliance with social norms. Both behavior and expression help to establish a recognizable 'currency' of fair exchange. Keeping with the economic exchange metaphor:

expressions of procedural meaning are also expected to pay face (*ibid*, p. 185). Politic behavior therefore is ritualized and institutionalized. On the other hand, if norms are not complied with, behavior can be interpreted either positively or negatively; this is the domain of contested politeness.

Historically, Watts (2003) has suggested that politeness involved notions around the capacity to please through exemplary language, a sure sign of a ‘polished’ state of mind and good character. France (1992, cited in Watts, 2003) apparently retains this essentially moral ideal when he says ‘constant consideration for others’ (p. 33) which ‘can perhaps be satisfied by a mask better than by a real face’ (ibid). Watts’ (2003) criticism is that politeness has been used as a basis of control, mystification and hegemony and actually contributed to inequalities in society.

Situating politeness as a certain 'reactive sensitivity' in the concept of habitus is Watts' (2003) primary reason for rejecting politeness theory. While cultural perceptions and values differ, so do personal notions of appropriate behavior (Sifianou, 1992, cited in Watts, 2003). Thus it is difficult to conceive of strategies actually corresponding to FTAs. The speaker would need an accurate measure of the FTA that takes into account the hearer’s orientation, *apriori*. Even if this were possible, it then negates the idea of negotiation, which is what people *do* in their responses. For instance reticence but resignation to comply with a request is a form of protest that could be the result of an FTA.

Theoretical politeness therefore fails to account for a large number of variables, not least of which are the hearer’s feelings on any given occasion, but also the hearers willingness to show these feelings--as they need not necessarily be expressed publicly, (they are nevertheless felt privately). Tannon (1986) has remarked for instance, that while perceptions may be grossly misinterpreted cross-culturally, this is only because they are most visibly apparent when backed by culture. All individuals differ howver in terms of conversational style (*ibid*)——a style which is influenced by such factors as social inequalities, education, gender, age differences, socio-economic background, culture, and socialization.

There is also another side to consider. In deference cultures (Goffman, 1967, quoted in Watts, 2003), conveying appreciation to others is more for the sake of appearances than as an expression of true sentiment. Taking a line therefore is to adopt a face, a position argued by Watts (2003) which shows

that Goffman's (*ibid*) conception of face draws out the dialectical interplay between avoidance rituals (recognizing a possible imposition) and presentational rituals (paying face). This is another criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1987) conception. Both sides of face are simultaneously involved in social behavior rather than one or the other.

Interchanges do not involve absolute power verses absolute servitude. Face is a construct that involves the interaction of participants; in mutual recognition, within a reciprocal relationship (Watts, 2003). "We can only lay claim to a positive social value in accordance with the way our actions are interpreted by the group" (Watts, 2003, p. 124). For Watts (2003), face involves maintaining dignity of self *and* that of others, just as to lose face is to lose it involved with others, and to maintain face is as much about self-dignity, as it is afforded by interaction.

In sum, Watts' (2003) model of politeness involves two key ideas. The first is that an individual is the locus of politeness, "… it is concerned with interpersonal rather than ideational meanings' (Watts, 2003, p. 173). Second, politeness is a classificatory evaluation but since no two individuals' frames of reference are the same, attempts at politeness can backfire, such as when insincerity is perceived.

Politeness therefore is a *contested position* which leads Watts to call it '(im)politeness'. In verbal interaction interlocutors are quite capable of changing their politic behaviour and adapting their habitus in accordance with the exigencies of the ongoing interaction. Orientation is a flexible rather than a fixed position as people are essentially creative in how they express meaning. Language is therefore an essentially unrestricted resource for discursive practices meaning it can express virtually any idea, but negotiating meaning is of the utmost importance if our own orientation is to be protected.

Watts (2003) analysis would have us consider whether or not deference cultures (such as Japan) exploit politeness strategies in this contested way. Naturally getting at meaning requires negotiation and those who tolerate ambiguity apparently forego this right. Does deference mean forgoing critical interaction? It could be argued that cultures who value a more (visibly) ambiguous form of social interaction do not value critical involvement (and so do not forego the right to contest it). Indeed, from a deference point of view, power struggles are contradictory. Deference behavior is of a

different order, one that doesn't empower the individual at the critical level but does nevertheless create solidarity and overtime affords social mobility to the individual albeit in a culturally specific way.

Unless we are willing to theorize the individual, we will never be in a position to theorized individually marked instances of politeness. Variability among cultures today demonstrates that politeness can only be generalized on one level. All cultures recognize forms of appropriate behavior. English politeness tends toward the maintenance of distance. Japanese notions of politeness apply to social ritual. How then can a theoretical ideology of politeness designate the terms for these differences?

In summary, speech act theory recognizes the difference between speaker intention and the communicative effect in communication, noting that meaning is not encoded in language but is subject to interpretation. Interlocutors can never fully predict the affect they will have on others. Reconstructing the meaning of a message involves hearers making inferences and this is done using all the contextual information. Politeness strategies give interlocutors a sense of legitimate control over the potential for conflict in interaction, a conflict that might otherwise result from their attempts to influence change or undermine norms. Politeness allows speakers of unequal power to reach their own individual communicative objectives. The challenge is to communicate across the divide of perceptions. Pragmatically, politeness is an illocutionary phenomena (Thomas, 1995) that is not readily analyzable (Thomas, 1995: Mills, 2003) even in real world data because we don't have access to a person's intentions or the overlapping contextual information that frames conversations (Mills, 2003). Orientation toward others changes over time and may be situated anywhere between 'rapport-enhancement,' 'rapport-maintenance,' 'rapport neglect,' and 'rapport challenge' (*ibid*). As frames of reference shift in communication they constantly have to be redefined, and this explains why theorizing politeness is an impractical venture.

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