AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE ON IM/POLITENESS AND THE PRAGMATIC CONCEPT OF FACE

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The concepts of im/politeness and face are central to pragmatic accounts of human communication. Im/politeness can be defined as behaviour designed to disarm or enhance aggression, whereas the notion of face broadly refers to a person's reputation in interaction. Given their centrality, both concepts should also play an important role in accounts of the evolutionary emergence of language and human communication. Here, we adopt an evolutionary perspective on im/politeness and face. We first describe the roles im/politeness and face play in human interaction, with a special focus on the subcomponents comprising the concept of face: self-image or self-worth, interpersonal affect, identity, and reputation. We then briefly sketch the evolutionary benefits of im/politeness and face, highlighting their role in co-operation and group management. Lastly, we discuss aspects of face shared with other primates, focussing especially on the process of reputation formation. We conclude that although reputation formation can be seen as an evolutionary foundation of the evolution of face, face management is uniquely expressed in language and human interaction.

1. Introduction

In this paper we adopt an evolutionary perspective on im/politeness and the pragmatic concept of face. Whereas language evolution research has increasingly focused on the importance of pragmatics (e.g., Scott-Phillips 2017), the concept of im/politeness and its relation to the pragmatic concept of face so far have hardly received any attention. Given its centrality to human interaction, an evolutionary perspective on im/politeness and face can prove highly valuable in shedding further light on the pragmatic foundations of language use and evolution (cf.

Pleyer & Pleyer 2016; Mühlenbernd et al. 2021). In this paper, we present such an evolutionary perspective, first focussing on theoretical and definitional work in pragmatics and im/politeness studies on the concepts of im/politeness and face. We will then take a look at the potential evolutionary benefits of im/politeness and face, and explore aspects of face that humans share with other primates. Overall, we will argue that many aspects of im/politeness and face are shared with other primates, but that they are uniquely expressed in human language.

2. Im/Politeness

Before we can discuss the evolution and evolutionary benefits of being im/polite, we must first define the object under study. In linguistics, there is a plethora of definitions of im/politeness (Culpeper 2011); for us, the following two are the most central. For Brown and Levinson (1987: 1), "politeness, like formal diplomatic protocol […] presupposes that potential for aggression as it seeks to disarm it, and makes possible communication between potentially aggressive parties." In other words, politeness relies on the interactants' wish to cooperate and to avoid conflict (see also Leech 1983). Impoliteness, on the other hand, seeks to create antipathy and non-cooperation (see also Kienpointner 1997): "Situated behaviours are viewed negatively – considered 'impolite' – when they conflict with how one expects them to be, how one wants them to be and/or how one thinks they ought to be." (Culpeper 2011: 23). This means that impoliteness includes a violation of (social) norms and/or expectations. It may trigger negative emotions, such as anger, shame, or sadness, and can have negative consequences, ranging from one or more participants feeling offence to the potential of physical altercations.

In our view, both politeness and impoliteness rely on the same shared cognitive mechanisms, and further, interpretations of behaviours as polite or impolite rely heavily on contextual factors. Thus, politeness and impoliteness should be seen as two end points of a scale rather than two distinct phenomena (see also Watts 2003). It is relevant for the evolution of im/politeness that both can be expressed using a potentially open-ended set of verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Polite verbal behaviours include e.g. complimenting, showing interest in H, or giving deference, whereas non-verbal politeness may include smiling or doing an action beneficial to H – in short, behaviours that make H feel good and thereby demonstrate the other's wish to cooperate and avoid conflict. Impoliteness, in turn, includes behaviours that make the hearer 'feel bad' (Culpeper 2011: 9), such as verbally insulting them, offering dispraise, showing disinterest or upsetting power relations; non-verbal behaviours may include shouting or frowning at H,

or doing an action detrimental to their well-being. In short, many of these actions include an unmitigated potential for aggression. Many of these non-verbal expressions of im/politeness may well be shared with other non-human primates (Mason & Mendoza 1993).

3. Face – what it is, what it isn't

The pragmatic concept of face can be described as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967: 5). This means that face is associated with personal, relational and social value, and is concerned with people's sense of worth, reputation, competence, etc. As such, it is understood as a dyadic, interpersonal phenomenon that is co-constituted in interaction (Arundale 2006). Face is thus a way of managing rapport, or self and other (Spencer-Oatey 2008). One must distinguish between individual face and group face, a form of face that highlights the concerns of the group over the individual (see e.g. many non-Western societies, Nwoye 1992). Face is further relevant for the expression of im/polite beliefs: polite behaviour seeks to maintain or enhance the hearer's face in that all potential face-threats must be redressed with politeness (see Brown & Levinson 1987), while impoliteness sets out to threaten it (Culpeper 1996).

In pragmatics, research has highlighted several concepts that are closely related to face, and that may be shared to a degree with other primates. These are self-image or self-worth, interpersonal affect, identity, and reputation.

One's self-image are ideas a person has about themselves and would like others to entertain, as well. It is distinct from face as one can have a self-image separate from interactions, but face can and is only relevant in interactions with others (see Goffman's 1967: 5 view of face as being "on loan from society"). Speakers may be able to modify their self-image (e.g. by dressing in a certain way) which might inform their face, but threats to face might, but do not automatically have to, incur loss of self-worth.

Interpersonal affect is similar to, but cannot be fully equated to face. For instance, the speaker's malign intent in a potentially face-threatening act can be overcome by H in pretending S had an originally supportive intent. Thus, in a group setting, H would not lose face, but the interpersonal relation between S and H might suffer (see O'Driscoll 2011: 20-21). Interpersonal affect requires quite a high level of social awareness, as well as knowledge about the distinction of individual and group face.

Identity and face are closely interconnected aspects. Some researchers in essence equate the two concepts; for instance, for Sifianou (2011: 42), face "can be seen

as a positive social image akin to identity." Zimman (2018: 178-79) describes identity creation as an intersubjective construction together with other interactants, which bears strong similarities to Goffman's (1967) understanding of face. Other stances see a clear distinction between these concepts in that face is bestowed upon ego by society post-factum, whereas identity is also bestowed upon ego by ego (Spencer-Oatey 2007). Arundale (2006: 202) echoes this view, and further understands identity as a phenomenon much broader than face. In our view, identity then requires a knowledge of the self as an individual, and as the individual having some control over how self is presented to others. Some aspects of this phenomenon are likely shared with a small subset of animals, e.g. those that can recognise themselves in mirrors, such as cetaceans, great apes, magpies, crows, and Asian elephants (De Waal 2019). Some animals, such as chimpanzees, might even have a more developed concept of self extending across time and space, as indicated in their ability to recognise themselves in delayed video footage (Hirata et al. 2017).However, the concept closest to face that is most central for our understanding of primate interactions seems to be that of reputation. Reputation can be described as "a universal currency for human social interactions" (Milinski 2016), and signals the likely behaviour of an individual (see also Mühlenbernd et al. 2021). Thus, there is quite a strong overlap with Goffman's (1967: 5) 'line' that others assume we take in a given interaction. As the concept of reputation is used both in pragmatics and evolutionary studies, it seems an ideal concept for interdisciplinary research

4. The evolutionary benefits of im/politeness and face

In our view, the aspects of politeness most relevant to early humans are that of cooperation and avoiding conflicts. Behaving in accordance with the group face, and avoiding conflicts secures the group's cohesion, and as such, can be beneficial to both the group's survival and, more importantly, the survival of individual members within the group. This can be strengthened with emerging conventions of how to do things (with words), i.e. shared sets of pragmatic norms which, if followed, demonstrate the individual's belonging to a group. In this way, individuals who adhere to these emerging conventions within such groups accrue benefits to their own evolutionary fitness. We can observe similar behaviours in non-human apes. For example, research has shown that baboons, who live in groups up to 100 individuals, show an awareness for social norms and power structures (Bergman et al. 2003).

However, there are also evolutionary benefits to impoliteness, as it can also be used as a method of in-group management (Kienpointner 1997). As such,

impoliteness secures group norms by excluding those individuals who are unwilling or unable to follow them. This generates a group of like-minded individuals who share the same conventions, which, as stated above, may aid in survival. It further enhances group stability in generating an 'us' vs 'them' mentality, which may aid in e.g. resource distribution. Just as for politeness, an individual who successfully manages their belonging to and status within a stable in-group will enhance their own evolutionary fitness.

5. Aspects of face shared with other primates

Many non-human animals also exhibit complex social cognition. This holds especially for non-human primates. Chimpanzees, for example, understand psychological states like seeing, knowledge and ignorance, know that others make inferences, and understand others' perceptions and intentions (e.g., Bettle & Rosati 2020). These capacities have the potential to shed light on the evolutionary origins of the human interactive concept of face and the question of which aspects of face are shared with other primates.

As mentioned in Section 3, one aspect of face that is also crucial to primate and many non-human animal interactions is that of reputation. From a comparative psychological perspective, reputation can be defined as "knowledge of an individual's typical behaviour in a situation based on their past behaviour" (Russel et al. 2008). Acquiring knowledge about an individual's reputation is known as reputation formation (Herrmann et al. 2013). There are three principal ways of reputation formation (Smith & Harper 2003): through direct experience, through observation of other individuals interacting with each other, and through gossip, that is, receiving third-party information about somebody's behaviour. In humans, all three sources contribute to reputation formation. Other animals, however, seem not to make use of communicative signals that inform others of the reputation of a third party. However, for some highly social non-human animal species, reputation formation might not only be based on direct interactions, but also on observations of others' interactions. For example, Subiaul et al. (2008) found that chimpanzees preferred to interact with individuals that they observed to be 'generous' to others versus those that they observed to be 'selfish'. Similarly, Russel et al. (2008) found that chimpanzees preferred individuals they observed to exhibit 'nice' behaviour to those that exhibited 'nasty' behaviour. However, they found no such preference for gorillas, bonobos, and orangutans. Herrmann et al. (2013) found that both chimpanzees and orangutans preferred 'nice' to 'mean' individuals, with bonobos showing no such preference. In all three experimental designs, 'generous'/'nice' vs 'selfish'/'nasty'/'mean' was operationalised as whether an individual would share food with somebody else

who begged for food. This research therefore indicates that in addition to direct reputation formation through interactions with conspecifics, indirect reputation judgement is present to at least some degree in some of the other great apes.

However, the potential mechanisms involved in this process are still being debated. Earley (2010) describes this process as 'social eavesdropping', where bystanders attend to, and use, information emitted by signallers; Russel et al. (2008) refer to a more specific process of 'image scoring', where person A monitors the giving behaviour of person B towards person C. Finally, Abdai & Miklòsi (2016) speak of a general process of social evaluation, which they describe as "a mental process that leverages the preference toward prosocial partners (positivity bias) against the avoidance of antisocial individuals (negativity bias) in a cooperative context." Given that social evaluation has also been observed in dogs and cleaner-client reef fish interactions (Abdai & Miklòsi 2016), it is possible that a general prosocial vs antisocial bias provides an evolutionary ancient foundation for the evolution of the human concept of face.

There is, however, one aspect related to face and reputation that seems not to be present in other primates to the same degree, namely that of reputation management. Humans seem to be uniquely aware and concerned with how others see them, and how their behaviour is evaluated collectively (Tomasello 2019). For example, Engelmann et al. (2012) showed that 5-year-old children steal significantly less and help significantly more in a scenario where they are observed by others, as opposed to a scenario where they were unobserved. The same was not found for chimpanzees, where there was no significant difference in stealing behaviour depending on whether they were observed or not. Actively trying to manage one's reputation therefore seems to be a crucial aspect of human face.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have addressed some important aspects of the evolution of im/politeness and face that have so far not received enough attention in pragmatic accounts of the evolution of language and human communication. Both im/politeness and face have evolutionary benefits, e.g. for group and resource management. Both humans and non-humans have complex sociocognitive capacities, but humans seem to be especially good at cultural learning, including im/politeness strategies, and group-mindedness.

Many components of face seem to be shared with other highly social species, especially other primates. As such, mapping animal behaviours on aspects of face can help develop an evolutionary perspective on its emergence in humans (cf. Lim & Bowers 1991). However, the explicit management and negotiation of aspects

of face seems to be uniquely expressed in human interaction, and especially so through the use of language.

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