
Lecture 1, winter term

Politeness Theory

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13 November 2023

The Co-operative Principle

- The commonest form of language use is possibly conversation. Grice proposed the most important **theory of language use**, which was intended to account for how a conversation can be kept going.
 - (i) **conversational partners are being co-operative** (as least insofar as they are trying to make their communicative intention evident), and
 - (ii) **they are supposed to speak informatively (*quantity*), truthfully (*quality*), relevantly (*relation*) and appropriately (*manner*)**, and 交际双方所说的话要信息量充足、真实、切题、恰当
 - (iii) **if an utterance superficially appears not to conform to (any of) the four maxims, the listener would look for a way of taking it so that it conforms in some way.** 如果一句话表面上不符合四项准则(或其中任何一个), 听话人会设法猜测其意义, 使之在一定程度上符合合作原则

0. Inadequacies of classic Gricean theory of CI

- No theory is perfect, of course. Are there any inadequacies in Grice's Co-operative Principle?
 - It seems that Grice failed to explain **why people are so often indirect in the way they talk.**
 - That is, why should a speaker resort to oblique methods of communication from time to time? Why, for instance, doesn't s/he say more tersely and directly ***"Lend me a dollar"*** instead of saying ***"Could you possibly lend me a dollar"***?

0. Inadequacies of classic Gricean theory of CI

- Given the inadequacies of **Gricean classic theory of Cooperative Principle**, scholars have attempted to modify or rectify it in various ways, resulting in different versions. The influential ones are as follows:
 - ◆ *Q- and R- Principles* by L. Horn
 - ◆ *Q-, I- and M- Principles* by S. Levinson
- } **Neo-Gricean Theories**
- ◆ Some scholars have complemented or even rectified it:
 - ◆ *Face Theory* by Brown and Levinson
 - ◆ *Politeness Principle* by G. Leech
 - ◆ *Relevance Theory* by D. Sperber and D. Wilson

Today's lecture

- Introducing **Politeness Theories** which may complement (补充) Grice's theory
 - “**politeness**” and “**face**” (面子)
 - Approaches to politeness
 - Brown & Levinson (1987/2013)
 - **Face, face threatening acts**
 - **Politeness strategies**
 - Leech (1983)
 - **Maxims of politeness**
 - Cultural differences in the use of politeness
-

No man is an island



- Humans are **social animals**:
 - They **live in groups** all over the world.
 - They are supposed to **treat each other well** in order to survive.
 - There should be **many ways to treat each other well**.
 - And **What** do you think is **the cheapest way**?

No man is an island by John Donne (1572-1631)

No man is an island,
entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main;

if a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friend's or
of thine own were:

any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind,
and therefore,
never send to know **for whom the bell
tolls;**
it tolls for thee.

没有谁是一座孤岛，
在大海里独踞；
每个人都像一块小小的泥土，
连接成整个陆地。

如果有一块泥土被海水冲刷，
欧洲就会失去一角，
这如同一座山岬，
也如同一座庄园，
无论是你的还是你朋友的。

无论谁死了，
都是我的一部分在死去，
因为我包含在人类这个概念里。
因此，不要问丧钟为谁而鸣，
丧钟为你而鸣。



John Donne was a British poet. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* took its title from this poem.

1. Introduction:

How do we behave in daily interaction with others?

- **Conversation**, as a linguistic activity, is essentially **a social interaction**:
 - In a conversation, we are not only sensitive to **what** others say, but also sensitive to **how** others say it.
 - Much of what we say is determined by our social relationships (please note that this accounts for the Chinese expression “见什么人说什么话”) and how we are keen to maintain these relationships.
- **People tend to judge us by what we say and how we say it.** So utterance interpretation goes beyond what we convey and includes also **evaluations** such as ‘**rude**’, ‘**inconsiderate**’, ‘**considerate**’ or ‘**thoughtful**’, which represent an additional aspect of communication perceived in terms of **politeness**. Even Children know this!

1. Introduction: How do we behave in daily interaction with others?

- Apart from **Grice's Co-operative Principle**, we seem to (sub)consciously follow another “**rule**” during the course of interaction, that of **politeness** (it seems written in our hearts!), which can be primarily expressed in the negative imperative “*Do not offend others*” or the positive imperative “*Be nice to others*”.
- So, in different societies, **politeness** seems a general **pan-human principle of social interaction**.
 - General idea of **politeness**:

A fixed concept of **social behaviour/etiquette** within a culture, involving certain general principles for **being generous, modest, tactful**(得体), **sympathetic** towards others (see Yule, 2006)

1. Introduction: politeness and face

- **Politeness** is considered as a **pragmatic** phenomenon:
 - Lakoff (1973): It is one of the two prior rules of **pragmatic competence** (i.e., “**Be clear**” and “**Be polite**”).
 - Leech (1983): It is the main defining factor of human **speech acts**.
 - Brown & Levinson (1978/1987): It is **universal**, i.e., it **should be observed in all cultures**.
- **Why being polite to others?** Because we want to **show respect** to others’ **‘face’**. The concept of **politeness** is closely related to the concept of **face** (the same concept used in expressions like ***lose face***).

Chinese expressions about *face*

- **face** = the *public self-image* of a person, i.e., *emotional and social sense of self* one has and expects everyone else to recognize.
- There are so many expressions about “face” in Chinese, e.g.,
 - 人要面子树要皮。
 - 死要面子活受罪。
 - 李敖：很多男人为什么找不到女朋友？
很简单，爱面子胜过爱女人。



Chinese expressions about face



《蒋公的面子》，温方伊 编剧：1943年，当时兼任国立中央大学（现南京大学）校长的蒋介石邀请中文系三个教授吃年夜饭，后者为**是否给蒋公面子**争论不休。

三位教授都很清楚，去是给老蒋面子，不去就是打他的脸，可能后果很严重。

1. Introduction: politeness and face

- **The concept of “face”, which is Chinese in origin, seems universal across languages. E.g.,**

English

save face

lose face

put on a brave face, etc.

Chinese

留面子

丢面子

争面子 (*fight for face, etc.*)

1. Introduction: politeness and face

LIN Yutang (*My Country and My People* 《吾国与吾民》, 1935: 199-200):

*Interesting as the Chinese physiological face is, the **psychological face** makes still a more fascinating study. It is not a face that can be washed or shaved, but a face that can be “granted” and “lost” and “fought for” and “presented as a gift”(给面子) .*



(1895-1976)

注：将 humour 一词译为“幽默”的便是林语堂先生

1. Introduction: politeness and face

- **politeness** (in pragmatics) = *the means* employed *to show awareness of another person's face*
 - showing awareness for a **socially distant** person's face
➡ **respect, deference** (尊重)
*Excuse me, **Mr. Buckingham**, but can I talk to you for a minute?*
 - showing awareness for a **socially close** person's face
➡ **friendliness, solidarity** (团结)
*Hey, **Bucky**, got a minute?* (a nickname used to show closeness)
(or use a pet name such as **Honey, Sweetie, Babe/Baby, Buddy**, etc.)
 - As you can see, different kinds of politeness are **marked linguistically** with the assumption of relative social distance (***speak formally***) or closeness (***speak informally***, e.g., nicknames)

2. Politeness Theory

- Based on the observation that when people interact, they constantly worry about **maintaining face**, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) argue that Grice's Cooperative Principle can be extended to apply to ***the maintenance of face*** as well as to ***the communication of information***.
- Conversationalists **work together**, each trying to **maintain his/her own face and the face of his/her counterpart**.

[Why? Because they always face a challenge: Most kinds of speech pose at least some threat to the face of the participants in a conversation, e.g. ***telling something to someone may imply that s/he was ignorant of the fact in the first place.***]

E.g., the use of “do you know...” presupposes that others don't know what you are going to tell.

2.1 Brown and Levinson's theory

- B&L's theory of politeness (or **Face Theory**) consists of three basic components: **face**, **face threatening acts** (FTA) and **politeness strategies**.
- They suggest two kinds(or sides) of face:
 - **positive face**: desire for respect, admiration and approval (i.e. need to be accepted/liked, to be treated as a member of the same group).
 - **negative face**: freedom from imposition (i.e. people don't want to be intruded or disturbed; instead, they want to have freedom of action nor be forced by others to do something)

These are **the TWO sides** of **our** (social or emotional) **face**.

- Note that 'negative' here doesn't mean 'bad', but opposite to 'positive'.

- *My Fair Lady* 《窈窕淑女》 视频

Professor Henry Higgins:

***“In Hertford, Hereford, and Hampshire,
hurricanes hardly ever happen.”***

Eliza Doolittle:

***“In Ertford, Ereford and Ampshire,
urricanes ardly hever appen.”***

- *Six months later...*



Six months later, the professor succeeded in turning the girl into a lady.

Prof. Higgins's Positive Face was saved...
And Pickering's own face was self-protected...



My Fair Lady 《窈窕淑女》

Please note that Pickering, a very close friend of Prof Higgins's, is a retired army officer.

2.1 Brown and Levinson's theory

- Brown & Levinson point out that different speech acts may threaten the **positive** and/or **negative face** of conversational participants, e.g.,

disapproval: threatens the positive face of H.

(coz the hearer usually expects S to accept his/her proposal, etc.)

order: threatens the negative face of H.

apology: threatens the positive face of S.

offer: threatens the negative face of S;

(coz the speaker would have to sacrifice his/her freedom to offer sth to the hearer.)

...

2.1 Brown and Levinson's theory

- Brown & Levinson also point out that **both speaker and hearer have face-preserving needs** :
 - Within everyday interaction, people generally behave as if *their expectations concerning their public self-image*, or their **face wants**, will be respected.
 - Two kinds of speech acts involving face can be identified:
 - **face threatening act**: speaker says something that represents a threat to another individual's expectations regarding self-image.
 - **face saving act**: speaker says something to lessen a possible threat.

2.1 Brown and Levinson's theory

- B&L: Politeness mitigates Face Threatening Acts.
- They suggest two kinds of politeness:
 - **positive politeness:** A face saving act concerned with *the person's positive face* will tend to show **solidarity** (团结), and emphasize that both speakers want the same thing and have a common goal.
 - **negative politeness:** A face saving act oriented to a *person's negative face* tends to show **deference** (尊重), emphasize the importance of the other's time or concerns, and may include an apology for the imposition , disturbance and so on.

2.1.1 Politeness strategies

■ Brown and Levinson propose **four types of politeness strategies**:

- ❑ ***bald on record*** (“直接策略”),
- ❑ ***off-record*** (“间接策略”),
- ❑ ***positive politeness*** (“正面礼貌策略”)
- ❑ and ***negative politeness*** (“负面礼貌策略”),

which can be used to formulate messages when face-threatening acts are involved.

2.1.1 Politeness strategies

- **Bald on record strategy** (直接策略): You can use imperative forms (*Do sth*) and directly address the other person to express your needs. This is **the most direct strategy**.

Give me a pen.

Lend me a dollar.

Have some more wine.

- This strategy **does not attempt to minimize the threat** to the hearer's face, since it is most often utilized in situations where **the speaker has a close relationship with the audience** (such as family or close friends), or the speaker and the hearer are social equals.
 - **mitigating** (lessening, 减轻, 减弱) **devices** (*politeness markers*, e.g. '*please*', '*will you*', '*would you*') can be used to soften the demand or lessen the seriousness of sth, e.g. *Lend me a dollar, please.*

2.1.1 Politeness strategies

- **Off record Strategy** (间接策略): This is **an indirect strategy**, i.e. using indirect statements to address another person
(i.e. hints)

Uh, I forgot my pen.

Where is the pen.

Hmm, I wonder where I put my pen. (Yule, 1996)

(A couple is lying in bed)

Wife: *“Irving, it’s cold outside.”* (**indirect** request)

Husband: closed the window and made fun of her:

“So now it is warm outside?”

(Pinker, 2007)

2.1.1 Politeness strategies

- **Positive politeness strategy** (正向礼貌策略): This strategy seeks to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. It is used to make the hearer feel good, esp. in situations where the conversationalists know each other fairly well.

That's a nice haircut you got; where did you get it?

Using inclusive '**we**', '**let's**', **nicknames**, etc. to show solidarity(团结), emphasizing closeness between speaker and hearer.

*If **we** help each other, I guess, **we'll** both sink or swim in this course.*

*Come on, **let's** go to the party. Everyone will be there. **We'll** have fun.*

*Hey, **my beauty**, How're you doing?*

2.1.1 Politeness strategies

- **Negative politeness strategy** (负面礼貌策略): It is more commonly performed in face saving acts.
 - features:
 - modal verbs: *Could you lend me a dollar?*
 - apologies: *I am sorry to bother you, but can I ask you for a dollar?*
 - hesitations: *Can you, uh, lend me a dollar?*
 - acknowledging a debt: *I'd be very grateful if you could lend me a dollar?*
 - Indicating reluctance: *I normally wouldn't ask, but could you lend me a dollar?*
 - **By saying that way, the strategy** shows a great deal of respect, great concern for face (politeness), and hence **may soften refusal**.

2.2 Leech's Politeness Principle

- Given that Grice's Co-operative Principle cannot in itself explain why people are so often indirect in the way they talk, **Geoffrey Leech (1983)** has proposed an **independent pragmatic principle**, to function alongside the Co-operative Principle, which he calls **the Politeness Principle**.
- Leech elaborated the politeness principle in several maxims: **tact, generosity, praise** (/approbation “赞许”), **modesty, agreement, and sympathy, and consideration**. Each maxim has two sub-maxims which should read something like “**minimize or maximize ...**”

2.2.1 Leech's Elaboration of Politeness in Maxims

- **The tact maxim** (得体准则) is oriented towards the hearer.
 - Minimize cost to the hearer.
 - Maximize benefit to the hearer.

1. *Take me home.*

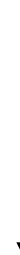
2. *I want you to take me home.*

3. *Will you take me home?*

4. *Would you take me home?*

5. *Could you possibly take me home?*

impolite



Polite

The five utterances above form a scale of politeness. (5) is the most polite, as it softens the effect of request (a cost to the hearer), i.e. getting the hearer to do something. Similarly,

*Could I interrupt you **for a second**?*

2.2.1 Leech's Maxims

The generosity maxim (慷慨准则) is oriented towards the speaker, so it is a sister to the tact maxim.

- ❑ maximize cost to yourself (i.e., speaker)
- ❑ minimize benefit to yourself

1. *You relax and let me do the dishes.*

2. *You must come and have dinner with us.*

The maxim says that others should be put first instead of the self.

2.2.1 Leech's Maxims

- The maxims of praise and modesty form another natural duo, concerned with the expressions of positive or negative opinions about the speaker or the hearer.
 - **The praise maxim** is oriented towards the hearer.
 - **minimize dispraise of the hearer** Girl: *Do you like my new dress?*
Boy: *Well, yes, but it's a bit bright.*
 - **maximize praise of the hearer:** *What a marvellous dinner you cooked!*
 - **The modesty maxim** is oriented towards the speaker.
 - **minimize praise of self** A: *What a marvellous dinner you cooked!*
B: **Yes, didn't I?*
 - **maximize dispraise of self** B: *Well, I didn't do too badly.*
-

2.2.1 Leech's Six Maxims

■ **The agreement maxim** (一致准则)

- ❑ **minimize disagreement with the hearer**
- ❑ **maximize agreement with the hearer**

A typical strategy is to begin with partial agreement before expressing disagreement, e.g.,

A: *She should be sacked immediately. We cannot tolerate unpunctuality.*

B: *I agree with the general principle, but in this case it seems too harsh on her.*

■ **The sympathy maxim**

- ❑ **minimize antipathy** (expressing negative feelings) **towards the hearer**
- ❑ **maximize sympathy** (expressing positive feelings) **towards the hearer**

I was very sorry to hear about your illness/failure in the exam.

2.2.1 Leech's Six Maxims

- **The consideration maxim** (体贴准则)
 - minimize discomfort or displeasure of the hearer
 - maximize comfort or pleasure of the hearer

Visitor to patient in hospital:

You're lucky to be in here, it's snowing outside.

3. Cultures differ in their use of politeness

- **The call for politeness may vary from culture to culture.**
People from different cultures show politeness in different ways.
- **A small test:**
 - How should one behave in **India** when s/he meets someone in higher social status? (印度人见面时的最高礼节是?)
 - How should one behave in **Thailand** when s/he meets others?
 - How should one behave in **China** and **Japan** when old people stand near him/her in a bus?

3. Cultures differ in their use of politeness

- **The call for politeness may vary from culture to culture.**

Typical Japanese Business Meeting (Pinker, 2007:387)

- ❑ 1st businessman: *Hello, sir.*
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *Hello, sir.*
- ❑ 1st businessman: *I am sorry.*
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *I am extremely sorry.*
- ❑ 1st businessman: *I cannot stand myself.*
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *I am swamp scum.* (沼泽地里的渣滓/浮垢)
- ❑ 1st businessman: *I am toenail dirt.*
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *I should be put to death.*



The humorist tries to capture how **Japanese people show a great deal of *politeness* to each other.**

3. Cultures differ in their use of politeness

■ Typical American Business Meeting (Pinker, 2007:387)

- ❑ 1st businessman: *Bob!*
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *Ed!*
- ❑ ...
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *Listen, about those R-243-J's, the best we can do for you is \$3.80 a unit.*
- ❑ 1st businessman: *My ass, Bob.* (my ass, variant of my eyes “我长着眼睛呢”)
- ❑ 2nd businessman: *Har!*



The humorist tries to capture how *little* call the American culture has for politeness when people are very close.

Pinker, Steven. 2007. *The Stuff of Thought*. Penguin Books.

4. Pre-sequences

- How can we **avoid or reduce the risk of face threatening acts** in a conversation? **Say something relevant first before expressing our real needs.**
 - The speaker can produce a **pre-request**.

A: **Are you busy?** (= *pre-request*, i.e. going to make a request)

B: *Not really* (= go ahead)

A: *Check over this memo* (= *request*)

B: *Okay* (= accept)

The advantage of making a pre-request is that hearer can decide to stop the pre-request or go ahead.

A: **Are you busy?** (= *pre-request*)

B: *Oh, yeah. Busy, busy, busy.* (= stop)

This response allows the speaker to avoid making a request that cannot be granted, and hence his/her own face can be preserved.

4. Pre-sequences

□ pre-invitations

A: What are you doing this Friday? (= pre-invitation)

B: Hmm, nothing so far. (= go ahead)

A: Come over for dinner. (= invitation)

B: Ahm I'd like that. (= accept)

□ pre-announcements

*A: I forgot to tell you the two best things that happened to me today.
(=pre-announcement)*

B: Oh cool – what were they? (=go ahead)

*A: I got a B+ on my math test...and I started dating within my species.
(=announcement)*

5. Summary

- Conversation, as a linguistic activity, is essentially a social interaction: *Much of what we communicate is determined by our social relationships* (please note that this accounts for the Chinese saying “见什么人说什么话”) and how we maintain these relationships.
- In many cases, utterance interpretation goes beyond what we convey and includes also **evaluations** such as ‘rude’, ‘inconsiderate’, ‘considerate’ or ‘thoughtful’, which represent an additional aspect of communication perceived in terms of **politeness**. Namely, people tend to judge each other, using such dichotomies as “rude vs considerate /generous/ sympathetic/ tactful/ thoughtful”.

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Suggested Reading:

陈新任, 2021, 《新编语用学教程》, 外研社。

Yule, G. 1996. *Pragmatics*, Chapter 6. OUP.

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Homework: WTO

- Watch: *English Vinglish*

《印式英语》

- Think (about):

- Why do people care so much for their (psychological) 'face'?
- Are there any differences between the English face and the Chinese face? Provide some evidence.

- Other questions?

