**Linguistic Politeness – Strategic choices in spoken and written language**

**1.1 Introduction**

This essay is an attempt to discuss “Politeness” as a linguistic variable employed by interlocutors during speech acts, to achieve conversational harmony in social interactions. Politeness has been analysed by many experts and in the first section of this essay, I will summarize the key approaches regarding the same as put forth by leading sociolinguists.

Though the need to be respectful and create good impressions is universal, the linguistic methodologies of “polite” speech vary by language, culture and community. Hence any sociolinguistic approach attempting to decode politeness must underline the fact that politeness strategies don’t operate in a vacuum, and are hugely dependent on cultural norms and language specifications. The same behaviors or gestures considered polite within one culture may be seen as unsavory in other cultures.

**1.2 Approaches to linguistic politeness**

Some influential theories analyse linguistic politeness through a set of rules or tenets. The politeness principle (Lakoff, 1973) formulates three main rules for polite conversation, which involve making the addresee feel good, giving them options and not imposing on them. A later version of the politeness principle is based on a more comprehensive set of maxims (Leech,1983) – namely of sympathy, agreement, modesty, approbation, tact and generosity. Each maxim requires the speaker to maximize expressions that imply benefits and minimize expressions that imply costs, to the receiver. Accordingly, politeness depends on choices that the speaker makes to indicate certain things – impositions on the receiver are minimal and require less effort, and in any case the receivers time is highly appreciated. These maxims also underline the importance of creating a positive interaction through praise, agreement and humility.

Brown and Levinson (1987) define politeness as paying attention to the interlocutors’ desire to save face. Face in this context refers to the social identity or image that speakers want to maintain or create for themselves. Politeness is an ongoing endeavor to satisfy these face wants – negative or positive – characterised by a desire to not be disrespected/disturbed or as a desire to be admired, loved and cooperated with respectively. Post-hoc mechanisms to minimize the effects of a face threatening act also fall under politeness. The notion of face is central to Brown’s theory, with the speaker playing an active role in choosing linguistic alternatives that may maintain or threaten face of themselves and the addresee.

The above approaches work well in explaining conversation styles in western societies but fall short when applied to other cultures. These theories designate politeness as a strategy – conscious decisions made by speakers to maintain or threaten face. These decisions are influenced by factors such as the power dynamic, distance/rank and cost of imposition. i.e the objective is to consider the speech act in terms of cost of being impolite. Contrast this with social systems in countries like Japan. Linguistic politeness in these cultures is defined by adherence to certain social and cultural norms which are deemed appropriate or necessary to engage in polite conversation. A system of this kind does not require the speaker to strategise, like the models mentioned above, but to make appropriate choices based on constraints and context. Speakers in such societies discern (Sachiko Ide, 1986) the social context and follow an “obligatory” system of address in order to be polite. Thus, speakers of certain cultures may make strategic choices based on social advantage, power dynamics, cost of infarction etc, while others are polite because they have codified systems of propriety and have acquired it as a part of their language competence. Politeness can thus be thought of as part of one’s linguistic competence or linguistic performance.

Whether speakers discern or strategise ways to be polite, they express politeness through a variety of linguistic devices. These include honorifics, euphemisms, idiomatic expressions, fillers, hedging expressions etc. Languages differ vastly in the availability and use of these devices. The use/non-use of these devices may occur in three contexts – perform a face threatening action and go bald on record, perform an FTA and go off record, redress the FTA through positive or negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Though brown and levinson’s theories derive some criticism in terms of their universal applicability, they do help us understand (though not completely) certain linguistic choices made by speakers of different languages. In the next section, I present a comparative analysis of these linguistic choices with some examples.

**2.1 Comparative analysis in politeness strategies**

The languages Tamil and English share a few common features with respect to the notion of face, while also differing in aspects like honorifics and other linguistic forms to express politeness

**Example** **Data** **2.1.1**: At the office – An employee and his boss working late to finish a deadline. The employee wishes to go home

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| **English** | **Tamil** | **Strategy** |
| Sir, I’ll be leaving now as it is very late. | “*Saar, naan ippove kelambanum. Romba neram aaya-cu”*  **Gloss**: ‘sir, I must leave now. It is very late’ | Bald – on record |
| Sir, I hate to ask, but would it be okay for me to leave now? I promise to finish this work first thing tomorrow. | *“saar, manikka-num. Kekka-rennu tappa ninai-kaa-d-inga. Romba Neram accu, vi: tu-ku poga-num. Naalaikku seyatuma?”*  **Gloss**: Sir you must forgive me. Don’t take it wrong that I ask. It’s very late, I must go home. Shall I do this tomorrow? | Negative politeness-Apology, hedging expressions etc |
| Is that the time? I thought it was just 8:00! Where did the time go?  *[Hinting that the time is 10:00]* | “aiyo, *mani adu-kul-a patta?”*  **Gloss**: Oh my, time is already 10 o clock?) | Off-record. Hinting a desire to leave |
| You must be getting late, **chief**! Why don’t I complete this in the morning? | “*Ungalukku neram acce* ***talaiva****! Naan venum-na naalaiku seyren-e!*  **Gloss**: You’re getting late, boss-man. Let me finish this in the morning? | Positive politeness. Use of group identity markers, expressions of concern |

Both languages use certain expressions or interjections to soften a potentially face threatening act.

“Aiyo” in Tamil is an interesting example that can be used to both threaten positive face as well as a positive politeness strategy.

*“Aiyyyyo! Evalo azhaga irukke”*

Oh wow! How beautiful you look”

*“Aiyo! enna idu?”*

Oh god! What is this? *(to express disapproval or distaste)*

English speakers often use euphemisms to compensate for lacking levels of respect. Humor is also used to threaten positive face. The humor is also a positive politeness strategy as it invokes a sense of intimacy and shared world views thereby minimizing the effects of an FTA. Tamil also shares this feature by using interesting euphemisms and jocular expressions.

**Data Example II:**

A commuter on the road, expressing discontent or anger or concern at a fellow driver

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| **English** | **Tamil** | **Strategy** |
| “Watch where you’re going A\*\*\*\*!” | *“Ey! paa-tu po-da. Cāvukiraki!”*  **Gloss**: Hey! Watch how you go! Mortal moron! | Bald, on record.  Positive FTA |
| “My blind grandmother is a better driver than you are” | “kan-na enke vaccu otara?”  **Gloss:** Where are the eyes on your head, when you drive! | Postive FTA |
|  | “*Enna da. Veetla sollittu vantitiya?”*  **Gloss:** Have you informed your folks at home?  This is a euphemistic way of asking the driver if he has a death wish (he seems to have decided to die, informed/bid goodbye to his family) because he is driving terribly. | Use of humor, euphemisms to hint. Off-record |
| “Hey buddy. Everything okay? You almost rammed into my car” (positive politeness) | *“Pat-tu ponga annen! Ellam seri-daane?”*  **Gloss:** Take care brother! Is everything okay? | Positive politeness. Express concern, use of group identity codes |

Every language (speech and signed language groups) is unique in its use of linguistic and extra linguistic devices to express politeness. Depending on the cultural norms and quirks of a community, the ways they codify politeness may differ but politeness as a linguistic variable is universal.

**3. Politeness strategies in paradigms outside of speech**

In this section, I would like to shift my analysis to the kind of politeness mechanisms in virtual exchanges such as text messaging or instant messaging (Whatsapp for example). Texting is a more forgiving medium than speech even though it is termed “instant”. The interlocutors have the time to consider the content of their messages while weighting it with factors such as who they are communicating with, context etc. Even though text messaging is best used for personal communication, we still use it as a channel for both formal and informal conversations. These days we use whatsapp and other chat interfaces to talk to our friends, family as well as for communications with superiors, people of higher rank or social distance like teachers or employers. At the outset, text messaging was appealing because of its brevity and instancy. It was helpful in dispensing with small talk, and steered conversations into focused topics or purposes. But with time, texting has become more ubiquitous. Hence notions of face and politeness have become more relevant in our textual interactions.

In this section, I explore the idea that politeness is increasingly expressed via an extra-linguistic device, namely “emojis” in text messaging. Text conversations are usually high volume and velocity, i.e a long chain of short communiques. Thus, expression is constrained by speed and form. While originally, emojis were fun graphic ways to express emotions like happiness, sadness or mischief, they now serve another important function. Emojis are now used as fillers when interlocutors don’t necessarily agree, to break awkwardness or even soften the nature of certain messages They are effective in mitigating face threatening acts and are convenient politeness strategies.

I will illustrate these with some examples.

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| F1: Today was so much fun! I’m still full from the gigantic bowl of fries we shared today |
| F2: Yes, indeed. |
| F2: lol, I notice how you said “we” 😛 |
| F1: 😂Sure, you were just a witness |
| F2: maybe a handful of fries but that’s all 😛 |
| F1: ofcourse, who’s counting? 😉 |

***Example 3.1 (two friends)***

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`The use of emojis here in the above discourse, serves no purpose in terms of meaning. They are used, with the sole purpose of minimizing FTAs. “B” wants to point out that “A” actually had the lion’s share of the fries. This is a negative FTA that creates a potentially awkward situation for B. The emoji at the end of the sentence minimizes the effect of this FTA by making it seem like a mischievous/cheeky comment that was made just for the fun of it.

***Example 3.2 (groups: teacher vs students)***

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| T: Good evening. I have shared the materials for the class via email.  S1: received it. Thank you so much! 😊  S2: Thk you for sharing. 👍  T: The attendance in class is really declining. Disheartening to see, despite the best efforts taken by the school staff and teachers. What is the problem? Do you all find the classes boring?  S2: We really appreciate all your efforts sir. ☹ will definely be regular with our attendance.  S1: 😬 no sir, the classes are great!  S4: 🥺 thank you for all you do. we will try and be better as a class  S3: Sorry sir, ✨ Will try and be more regular from now on |

The above text is an example of using emojis to attend to positive face wants of the recipient. As this is a conversation between interlocutors who differ greatly in rank and social distance, emojis are an unusual choice. Yet, emojis are used effectively to express appreciation as well as chagrin or embarassment without damaging the negative face wants of the students. The emojis help ease the awkwardness while also boosting the positive politeness intent of the text they accompany.

**Example 3.3 (casual acquaintances)**

A: Hello there! What are you upto?

B: Hey! Nothing much. watching TV and stuffing my face 😂. And you?

A: Oh, now? Just chatting with a pretty girl 😛

B: 🤣well done.

The above exchange is an interesting example of mixed messaging, that satisfies the face wants of both participants. In potentially awkward conversations, emojis serve to neutralize tensions and give the participants a chance to save face. For example, the 😛 is used effectively here to neutralize the potentially flirtatious text (“just chatting with a pretty girl). The text may cater to the positive face wants of B, but since they are casual acquaintances, it also runs the risk of threatening B’s negative face (i.e the desire to not be engaged in awkward conversations or disturbed). The emoji acts like a buffer, which protects against awkwardness. The laughing emoji also serves this purpose. It might cater to the positive face want of the recipient (to be adored or appreciated) while also acting as a stand in for an actual comment. Thus, B effectively stops the conversation from proceeding into further awkwardness by using the emoji satisfying her negative face wants.

The above examples were by no way complete descriptions of the use of emojis as politeness devices, but provide a brief insight into their use in modern discourse.

**4. Concluding remarks**

Politeness is an important component of human interactions, which universally holds relevance in all kinds of linguistic expression – spoken/sign languages, textual discourse like chat or email, other forms of modern communication such as tweets, posts or blogs. Many factors contribute to the politeness strategies or choices made by the user - such as intent, costs or benefits, relationship or power dynamic among the participants, cultural morae, linguistic repetoire etc. Politeness is also realized in different ways depending on the medium of expression. Attention to face wants, harmony and cultural notions of respect and sincerity are central to the understanding of politeness in a sociolinguistic context.

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