Hello again, this is Kyle Roden narrating a presentation on negative politeness strategies from Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory.

First let’s review the major concepts of the theory. In Brown and Levinson’ politeness theory, both the speaker and the addressee are assumed to have positive and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be liked by others and negative face is the desire to be left alone. While positive politeness strategies address positive face, negative politeness strategies are directed towards the addressee’s negative face (Brown & Levinson, p. 70).

Negative politeness strategies are avoidance based, meaning that the speaker wants to avoid the degree of imposition felt by the addressee from the face threatening act that the speaker is doing. Brown and Levinson further describe them when they state that “Realizations of negative politeness strategies consist in assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action.”(p. 70)

Also remember that negative and positive politeness strategies are the two subcategories of “on record, with redressive action” strategies.

This is a figure of the ten negative politeness strategies and the sub-categories of wants which influence a speaker to choose a particular strategy. We won’t cover all 10 of the strategies, but we will look at at least one example from each of the first subcategories of wants: “don’t presume/assume”, “Don’t coerce H”, “communicate S’s want not to impinge on H”, and “address other wants of H’s”.

One of the first things you may notice is that Brown and Levinson include a “bald, on record” strategy, “be direct” even though that is an on record withoutredressive action strategy. They define “bald, on record” strategies as the most direct, clear and concise way to perform an FTA (p. 69). An example of this would be something like “That’s wrong; the gap should be bigger” (Brown & Levinson, 1978). That is a bald, on record strategy because it shows no signs of redressive action towards positive face, for example by saying “Hey buddy, that’s wrong; the gap should be bigger”. Nor does it show any signs of addressing the negative face, for example by using hedging such as “That’s sort of wrong; the gap should be bigger.”

Brown and Levinson say that strategy 1 of negative politeness, “be conventionally indirect” is in practical usage, the same as “being direct”.

They describe strategy 1 as a hybrid strategy (p. 130) because expressions like “Can you pass the salt” are so highly conventionalized that they are essentially direct requests. For those reasons, the authors make strategy 1, “be conventionally indirect” as the end destination for two separate wants: “be direct” and “be indirect”. They explain this in relation to the felicity condition of Austin and say: “by questioning whether you can shut the door (“Can you shut the door?”) or by asserting that I want you to shut it (“I’d like you to shut the door”) and so on, one can construct readily understandable indirect speech acts. In many contexts these are so conventionalized to the extent that there is no doubt about what is meant -- that is, they are on-record expressions.”(p. 133)

In this first example, the speaker says:

(EX 1) “Could you take a look at this for just a second?” (Created by Roden)

She uses a common hedge in English, “just”, which works to hedge the illocutionary force of requesting that the addressee take a look at something.

B&L say that strategy 2 is motivated by the two of a speaker’s wants: “Don’t coerce H” and a subordinate want of that, “Don’t assume H is/able/willing to do A”.

This second example demonstrates strategy 3, “Be pessimistic”. In this example, the speaker is visiting her professor. She says:

(EX 2) “I don’t suppose there’s any chance of you writing a letter of recommendation?” (Created by Roden)

She asks for the letter of recommendation by negating with “I don’t suppose” which is an example of polite pessimism.

Looking at the figure of negative politeness strategies, we see that strategy 3, “be pessimistic” is first categorized as “Don’t coerce H”, followed by “Give H options not to do act” and finally “assume H is not likely to do A”.

Moving onto the third example, the speaker says:

(EX 3) “Excuse me sir, but would you mind if I close the window?”. (Brown & Levinson, 1978)

This is an example of strategy 5, “give deference” which B&L say can be realized in two ways: the speaker humbling herself and the speaker raising the addressee. This is an example of the speaker raising the addressee, which is another way to say giving deference. We know this because the speaker refers to the addressee as “sir”. We could also interpret the use of “sir” as the speaker making the social distance variable explicit, since “sir” is usually only used between people who are very socially distant.

In the fourth example, we see an example of strategy 7, “Impersonalize the speaker and the addressee (avoid pronouns I and you)”. Notice that the police officer impersonalizes the addressee by not using the pronoun “you”, in something such as “You parked your car in a no parking zone”.

(EX 4) “That car’s parked in a no parking area” (Watts, 2003)

The figure shows that this strategy is derived from the two of the speaker’s wants: “Communicate S’s want not to impinge on H”, followed by “Dissociate S, H from the particular infringement”.

The last example exhibits strategy 10, “Go on record as incurring a debt, or not indebting H”. This was the first example from the overview video. The speaker acknowledges that if the addressee helps her, a debt will be incurred. To counter this, she establishes a tit for tat exchange with the addressee; a beer for help with formatting.

(EX 5) “If you could just sort out a problem I've got with my formatting, I'll buy you a beer at lunchtime.”

To wrap it up, remember that negative politeness strategies are directed to the negative face of the addressee. They indicate that the speaker will avoid or minimize the infringement on the addressee’s freedom to be left alone.

In the next video, we will analyze some longer examples of language in order to practice analysis within the Brown and Levinson framework of politeness.