Hello, my name's Kyle Roden and I'll be narrating this video series on Brown and Levinson’s theoretical model of Politeness and how to perform linguistic analysis using this framework. Keep in mind that there are other politeness theories put forth by linguists such as Robin Lakoff and Geoffery Leech (Watts, 2003) but these learning modules will only focus on Brown and Levinson's theory. This first video will be a bit longer than the rest in order to provide enough background on the concepts and terminology needed to understand and apply the theory.

First, it’s important to know that Brown and Levinson's theory relies on the concept of “face” which is something that every “model person” has. The concept of face comes from Goffman, and is defined as “basic wants, which every member knows every other member desires, and which in general it is in the interests of every member to partially satisfy.” (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 62). It’s assumed that when two people are interacting, as model people each will act rationally and will try to preserve their face and the face of the person with whom they’re interacting.

Brown and Levinson consider face as having two components: positive and negative face. Positive face is the desire to be approved of by others, and negative face is the want to be left alone by others.

Another key concept of the theory is the face threatening act which is a type of speech act which threatens the face of the speaker, the addressee or both. This could take the form of a request, a compliment and just about any other type of utterance. So for example, if a worker were to request help from her colleague, she is committing a face threatening act. She would be threatening the negative face of her colleague, the want to be left alone. Looking at the example here, the face threatening act is underlined.

(EX 1) “If you could just sort out a problem I've got with my formatting, I'll buy you a beer at lunchtime.” (Watts, 2003)

This figure represents how a model person who wants to be polite would attempt to mitigate the potential face damage of a face threatening act. The severity of the face threatening act is important in helping the speaker choose the right strategy to mitigate it, but we’ll discuss that concept a bit later.

The figure shows the strategies for the speaker to choose from when doing a face threatening act. The numbers represent the continuum of possible face damage that can be done, with 5 being the least damaging and 1 being the most damaging. Brown and Levinson posit that the speaker will choose a strategy which correlates appropriately to the degree of possible face damage of the FTA. Obviously the best strategy to avoid damaging anyone's face is to simply not do the FTA. Therefore the authors place the option “Don't do the FTA” at number 5.  
 Going up the scale of potential damage, number 4 is “off record”. Off record strategies are generally “hints” and can take several forms such as rhetorical questions, understatements and irony. Let’s look at an example an off record strategy which comes from Brown and Levinson:

(EX 2) “A: Damn, I'm out of cash. I forgot to go to the bank.” (Watts, 2003)

By making this statement, the speaker is intentionally ambiguous. If she is trying to get the addressee to lend her cash, the ambiguity allows her to avoid being accused of having that intent.

The last three strategies, numbers 1, 2 and 3, are “on record” strategies. On record refers to all strategies which make the communicative intent of the speaker clear. The most clear, concise requests would make no attempt to mitigate face damage, or as B&L put it, make no attempt at “redressive action”. The last three strategies are divided up into whether or not they include redressive action. Strategies 2 and 3 use redressive action and strategy 1 does not. There is a good example of redressive action in the underlined section of this example.

(EX 3) “If you could just sort out a problem I've got with my formatting, I'll buy you a beer at lunchtime.” (Watts, 2003)

The speaker acknowledges a debt to the addressee by offering a beer as compensation. In this case, the debt is owed by the speaker to the addressee for impeding on the addressee's freedom to be left alone. Brown and Levinson would categorize the speaker's strategy “going on record as to incurring a debt”, which is a type of negative politeness strategy.

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. In other words, negative politeness strategies contain at least some effort by the speaker to let the addressee know that the speaker knows that the addressee might rather be left alone.

The next on record category is positive politeness strategies. These strategies are directed to the addressee's positive face, which means that the speaker is communicating that the she approves of the addressee and her wants. (B&L p. 101) Positive politeness strategies are representative of normal linguistic behavior between people in an intimate relationship, but with a degree of exaggeration. More on this later.

In this underlined example, the speaker communicates to the addressee that he considers both of them as part of the same “in-group” by addressing the listener as “buddy”, making this a positive politeness strategy:

The last strategy in the figure, number 1 is referred to as “bald, on record”, which is when the speaker is doing the FTA in the most concise, clear, and unambiguous way possible. Brown and Levinson describe these strategies as being in conformity with Grice's Maxims. This means that the speaker is truthful, doesn't say more nor less than is required, is relevant and avoids ambiguity.

Bald, on record strategies are often used in emergency situations. In this example, “Call 911” is the most direct, least ambiguous way to communicate the speaker's wants, which makes this a “bald on record” politeness strategy.

Now that we’ve established some important terms and concepts of the theory, we can discuss how contextual factors affect which politeness strategy a speaker would use to mitigate the FTA. This theory proposes three variables which affect the speaker's decision in how or if to realize a FTA.

The first is the social distance between the speaker and the addressee. If there is a large social distance between the interactants, the speaker will use a more polite strategy and vice versa. For example, there is a large social distance between strangers and a very small social distance between close friends.  
 The second variable is the difference in power between the two interactants. A greater power differential will result in the use of a strategy with a greater degree of politeness. For example, there is a large power difference between the president of a University and a graduate student and a smaller power difference between the president of a University and the Vice President of a University.   
 The last variable is the degree of imposition of the FTA itself. These are situationally and culturally varying. One example in American culture could be thought of in terms of “giving a ride”. Giving a friend a ride to the airport at 4 am is more imposing than giving a ride to a co-worker who lives conveniently between one's house and work. Each of the three factors are relative, meaning that each person in the interaction may perceive them differently. For example, in a given interaction, one person might feel that the power difference is small, while the other person may feel it is larger.

The three variables dictate the ‘weightiness’ of the FTA, and therefore influence the speaker to choose an appropriate politeness strategy. When there’s a power difference and a high degree of imposition, a speaker is more likely to choose a more polite strategy, for example “don’t do the FTA”. However, an FTA with the same high degree of imposition between interactants with no power difference may result in the speaker choosing a type of on record strategy, such as a negative politeness strategy. Looking only at social distance, a speaker would be more likely to choose a more polite strategy, such as an “off record” strategy with a stranger while she would use a less polite strategy with her best friend, such as an “on record, positive politeness strategy”.

That’s it for the overview of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. The next video will give more details on the “positive politeness strategies” and provide some analysis practice.