Pergamon

Language Sciences, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 345–356, 1995

0388–0001/96 $15.00+0.00

0388–0001(95)00019–4

DEFINING POLITENESS: UNIVERSALITY IN APPROPRIATENESS

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The definition of politeness and the claims for universals have shown considerable divergence and lack of clarity as they have received increased attention since Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) proposed framework. This paper re-examines relevant literature relating to politeness in an attempt to bring some order to the issue and argues for a view of politeness as appropriate behavior, which provides a basis for a broader claim for universals and reduces the danger of ethnocentricism.

The notion of linguistic politeness was brought to center-stage with the politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). The concepts inherent to this model have been invoked in much subsequent literature which has focussed on linguistic carriers of politeness (e.g. speech acts, syntactic constructions, lexical items, etc.), seeking to quantify them, to compare them across cultures and genders, and to identify universals.

A closer look, however, at both Brown and Levinson's (B/L's) model and the subsequent literature reveals a disturbing amount of divergence and lack of clarity concerning the meaning of politeness and concomitant concepts, both across studies and within the same studies (see Meier, forthcoming). The indeterminacy regarding politeness concepts has ineluctably given rise to dubious research conclusions and has weakened comparability among empirical studies (see Meier, submitted, for an overview of apology studies). Additionally, the application of B/L's concepts has led to the unfortunate assignment of mental/moral traits to particular speech communities (cf. Braun, 1988) and to claims of ethnocentrism in assertions regarding universals (see e.g. Mey, 1993; Wierzbicka, 1985).

Politeness, as presented by B/L, seems, despite its unquestionable value, to have provided a less than facilitative basis for empirical studies.

The issue of the definition of linguistic politeness and its universals, thus, demands a re-examination which seeks to locate and tease out some of the tangles which have embedded themselves in recent work. The first section accordingly presents a brief overview of definitions of politeness, many of which have been inspired by a discomfort with B/L's treatment of it. Although an in-depth exegesis of the approaches is not possible here, the overview below demonstrates the current confusion inherent in the

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concept of politeness. The conclusion reached in the second section is that *politeness* is not in fact a useful working concept at all in view of the diverse array of communicative phenomena it is employed to cover and given the need for determining a non-ethnocentric bias for universals. What is advocated is a broader scope for universals which looks beyond selected formal features to the realm of appropriate social usage.

Definitions of politeness

Although Brown and Levinson devote an entire book to politeness, the concept is never actually defined (cf. Fraser, 1990; Watts *et al.*, 1992). The focus is rather on the depiction of two types of 'politeness strategies' (i.e. negative and positive), which function to reduce the imposition or threat to an addressee's face upon the enactment of an inherently face-threatening act (e.g. a command, an interruption). Negative strategies are characterized as expressions of restraint, formality, and distancing, whereas positive strategies are described as expressions of solidarity, intimacy, informality, and familiarity. These strategies parallel an individual's two face wants: to be unimpeded (negative face) and to be approved of (positive face). Brown and Levinson rate negative politeness as more polite (i.e. more face-redressive) than positive politeness and furthermore allow for the possibility of being 'too polite'. It is unclear, however, whether 'too polite' refers to the use of negative strategies, positive strategies, or a sum of the two.

A claim is made for universality to the extent that positive face wants and negative face wants are present in everyone, as is a mutual knowledge of face, a social pressure to attend to it, and the presence of principles governing the realization of indirect speech acts.

This framework has given rise to the idea that politeness is inherent in certain speech acts, syntactic constructions, lexical items, prosodic contours, and pragmatic features as identified by Brown and Levinson and those following them. Holmes (1990:156), for example, states that 'to apologize is to act politely'. Britain (1992) characterizes high rising tones in declarative sentences to be markers of politeness in New Zealand English. Bublitz (1980) lists *please*, *just*, passive voice, and tag questions as means of expressing politeness. 'Politeness routines' include *thank you* and *you're welcome* (e.g. Berko Gleason *et al.*, 1984), and 'polite address forms' are contrasted with 'familiar ones' (Haverkate, 1988).

Kasper (1990:200) strikes a middle ground of sorts and states that 'strategies and means of politeness are not endowed with absolute politeness values'. However, if polite strategies are not always polite, as she seems to be saying, one might well ask what qualifies them as politeness strategies to begin with?

Others unequivocally argue that neither a particular style (Arndt and Janney, 1985) nor particular syntactic constructions (e.g. Fraser and Nolen, 1981; Zimin, 1981) can be polite or impolite. This leads Arndt and Janney (1985:283) to favor a 'nonappropriacy-based approach to politeness', which centers on emotive communication, in particular, that which is supportive of *alter*.

An alternative view for others, however, is of politeness described in terms of what is socially appropriate or acceptable (see e.g. Adegbija, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1990; Fraser, 1980; Scheerhorn, 1991/92; Tannen, 1986). Werkhofer (1992) determines appropriateness to be a pre-condition of polite behavior. Craig *et al.* (1986) are also concerned with appropriateness, finding it to be 'inherently confounded' with politeness judgements (due to the context-dependence of these judgements). To resolve this confusion, they propose a distinction between two types of politeness: 'message strategies' and 'social judgements'. The strategies influence the judgements but are not their sole determinant.

Others have also gone the direction of distinguishing types of politeness in an attempt to clarify the concept. Janney and Arndt (1992), for example, distinguish between interpersonal politeness, or tact, and social politeness. Tact closely resembles B/L's concepts, being depicted as an individual's show of consideration for *alter* by addressing *alter's* (positive or negative) face needs in order to avoid conflict. Social politeness, on the other hand, is the use of social conventions for routine behavior (e.g. greetings, interrupting, leave-taking). Blum-Kulka (1989:67) similarly distinguishes tact from formal politeness, referring to both as aspects of 'appropriate, polite behavior'.

Watts *et al.* (1992) show less similarity to B/L's concepts with their distinction between first order politeness and second order politeness. First order politeness is characterized as 'commonsense notions of politeness' and is the proposed venue for individual cultural frameworks. Claims for universals, on the other hand, are to be found at the level of second order politeness, which entails maintaining a balance between interlocutors. Watts (1989, 1992) dubs this second order politeness 'politic' in contrast to first order 'polite' behavior. This provides a dichotomy to which others' similar distinctions, discussed below, can also be assigned, and it thus merits more attention here.

Politic behavior, according to Watts, is equivalent to socially appropriate behavior and hence unmarked. This contrasts with polite behavior, which is an enhanced, marked derivative of politic behavior, functioning to enhance an individual's own image in the eyes of others. Polite behavior then is viewed as a result of overpolitic behavior, whereas nonpolitic behavior leads to communication breakdown. Socially appropriate behavior, therefore, does not necessarily entail polite behavior according to Watts. It is in politic behavior, as second order politeness phenomena, that universality is to be sought, namely, in the underlying principles informing it. 'Wakimae', as used by Hill *et al.* (1986) to identify obligatory speech behavior (as distinguished from 'volitional'), according to Watts, also falls under the category of politic behavior.

Also corresponding to Watts' polite–politic distinction are politeness distinctions and continuums proposed by Blum-Kulka (1990, 1992), Ide (1989), Ide *et al.* (1992), Lakoff (1989), and Ehlich (1992).

Blum-Kulka's, 'extensively polite' (characterized as strategic–manipulative), for example, corresponds to Watts' polite, as contrasted with her 'polite' (characterized as appropriate), corresponding to Watts' politic.

Ide (1989) posits an unmarked type of politeness, which she terms 'non-polite' or 'zero polite' (Watts' politic) as opposed to a 'plus-valued politeness' (Ide *et al.*, 1992) termed 'polite', which is analogous to Watts' polite behavior. In Ide *et al.* (1992:281), however, the dichotomy between zero polite and polite seems to be confused in the assertion that polite is what linguists usually refer to, followed by the claim that a commonality in all such references lies in 'appropriate language use associated with smooth communication'.

Ide also seems to differ from Watts by pointing to zero politeness as the arena for investigations of individual speech communities, whereas for Watts it is universals which are to be sought at this level (i.e. in politic behavior). The waters are decidedly murky in this regard, and the extent of this murkiness will doubtless depend on the perceived nature of universals being sought (e.g. linguistic, social, or a combination of the two).

Lakoff (1989), in contrast to the above, bases her continuum of 'polite', 'non-polite', and 'rude', on expectations regarding politeness rules. 'Polite', for example, refers to the use of politeness rules regardless of expectation. 'Non-polite' behavior occurs when politeness rules are not used and are not expected. And 'rude' involves disregarding politeness rules when they are in fact expected. It is not clear, however, what politeness rules consist of and on what basis they are determined. In ordinary conversation, as opposed to courtroom discourse, for example, Lakoff (1989:103) seems to equate clarity with non-politeness. She further maintains that politeness will differ in importance depending on the discourse genre: the more transactional the interaction, the less important politeness will be. Although Lakoff's continuum does not correspond as closely to Watts' dichotomy as do the others discussed above, Lakoff's non-polite is analogous to Watts' politic in representing appropriate, unmarked behavior.

Ehlich's (1992) distinction between 'socially developed regularities' and 'going beyond regularities', on the other hand, very closely parallels Watts' politic and polite categories. Ehlich (1992:76) further emphasizes the relativity of politeness in its association 'with an interactional relationship which is itself transmediated by a standard'. This standard establishes certain limits on behavior that, when exceeded, invite censure. Reference to a standard is thus deemed necessary to determine whether behavior is polite or not. Werkhofer (1992) likewise invokes the idea of limits and subsequent relativity, which also finds support from those who view politeness to be operative in every interaction (e.g. Lavandera, 1988; Tracy, 1990). Lavandera, for example, stresses the precedence of context in determining the 'polite or impolite effect' (1988:1196) of a 'polite' form (see also Weinreich, 1986).

Yet another view of politeness entails the concept of deference,[1] which is often used interchangeably with politeness (e.g. Adegbija, 1989; Blum-Kulka, 1989). This is not surprising in view of the fact that Brown and Levinson claim to derive their model of politeness from Goffman (1967), whose two forms of deference are transformed by B/L into their two types of politeness strategies. Deference, however, within B/L's framework takes on a rather confusing identity. While listing deference

as a strategy of negative politeness, the authors also claim that it has two sides, one corresponding to negative politeness and one corresponding to positive politeness.

Fraser and Nolen (1981), Rintell (1981), and Zimin (1981), on the other hand, explicitly differentiate politeness and deference (see also Watts, 1992), viewing an appropriate or inappropriate level of deference as contributing to the politeness or impoliteness of an utterance, but not being equivalent to it. Adegbija (1989) appears to embrace both worlds, equating the two concepts at one point while later in the same article affirmatively citing Zimin's distinction between the two.

Politeness has also, following Brown and Levinson, been held to be manifested in indirectness: the more obscure the intention of an utterance is, the more polite it is; the more direct or clear the intention is, the less polite (see e.g. Scheerhorn, 1991/92). Certain phrases and constructions have consequently been identified as being indirect (e.g. *Can you open the door?*) or direct (e.g. *Open the door.*). Certain cultures have also been identified as being direct or indirect (see e.g. House and Kasper, 1981; Tannen, 1981), and Bialystok (1993) suggests that languages themselves may differ in directness. Takahashi and Beebe (1993) suggest that the relationship between indirectness and politeness may differ from culture to culture, being more closely related in Japanese culture, for example, than in American culture.

The linear relationship assumed between indirectness and politeness led House (1989) to re-evaluate the status of *please* as a politeness marker, concluding that it is not in fact polite, since the addition of *please* to a request removes ambiguity, making it clear that the utterance is intended as a request. Others have rejected the relationship of politeness and indirectness *in toto* (e.g. Blum-Kulka, 1987, 1990; Held, 1989; Wierzbicka, 1985, 1991). Additional support for rejection of such a relationship comes from Wolof, in which directness is claimed to be the polite way to make requests (Irvine, 1978, cited in Hymes, 1986), from the Israeli Sabra culture, which values directness (Katriel, 1986), and from Chinese (Lee-Wong, 1994) in which the socially acceptable requests are the direct ones.

Politeness (or impoliteness) also seems to be an inherent trait ascribed to some cultures or groups within them. Adegbija (1989:58) asserts that 'politeness is very critically important in communication in Nigeria', thereby implying that there are speech communities where politeness is of less import. Blum-Kulka (1990) finds Israeli parents to be more polite (as measured by certain mitigating devices) to each other than to their children, whereas American parents in her study are equally polite to each other and to their children. Tanaka and Kawade (1982:18) claim that performatives and imperatives are 'normally awkward' and 'abrupt' in 'polite societies'. This points to Polish society as being collectively impolite, for, as Wierzbicka (1985) points out, performatives and imperatives are generally appropriate for advice-giving and directives. It is not perhaps surprising that an Anglo-centricity has been identified as pervading much research on politeness (Wierzbicka, 1985, 1991).

Both in the cases cited above as well as in the case of women being dubbed the more polite of the two sexes (see e.g. Baxter, 1984; Brown, 1980; Ide, 1990; Lakoff,

1975),[2] a crucial issue involves the basis of measurement for politeness. The tendency, albeit often covert, is for *more polite* or *less polite* to be defined in terms of certain formal features which are specific to a particular speech community. Cross-culturally, this has often been claimed to result in an 'Anglo' bias (see above), and across genders in a male bias (see Cameron, 1990, for a review of such research bias).

Claims for universality are clearly fraught with problems of interpretation, i.e. with problems of establishing objective measures for application across cultures. Ehlich (1992) warns of the dangers of ethnocentricity entering into attempts to determine standards which apply to all groups. And Hymes (1986:49) cautions against tendencies 'to seek the satisfaction of universal frameworks without realizing the empirical inadequacy of them'. There is indeed evidence that such caution is warranted, not only regarding tenuous claims of universality regarding directness as discussed above, but also regarding B/L's claim for the universality of face itself. This has been challenged on the basis that what constitutes face wants can vary among cultures as can the way to meet these wants. Matsumoto (1988, 1989), for example, argues that B/L's notion of face with its individual territorial rights cannot be applied to the Japanese, who are more concerned with positional relation to others than with individual territory (see also Ide, 1989). Gu (1990) similarly argues that B/L's concepts are inadequate to account for aspects of Chinese, e.g. perceptions of what constitutes a threat to negative face.

Even within one speech community *polite* may conjure up somewhat different connotations (see Blum-Kulka, 1992). This calls into question whether depictions of 'commonsense notions of politeness' (see Watts *et al.*, 1992 above) would find consensus. Likewise questionable is Tracy's (1990) assertion that it is B/L's negative politeness which is closest to people's everyday meaning of polite. How does one know, in fact, what people's everyday meaning of polite is in one speech community, to say nothing of its meanings across a variety of diverse cultures? Of equal import is the fact that the term *polite* itself may not even exist in another language, or, if it does, may cover a different spectrum of meanings, as Ide *et al.* (1992) have shown for Japanese.

Similarly, any terms such as *direct*, *indirect*, *formal*, *informal*, *clear*, *deferent*, etc. have dubious value as universal indices of politeness. Not only may there be differences in what is perceived as direct or indirect, for example, but the value placed on the concept itself may vary. Determining a language-independent measure of directness which could lead to claims of universality as regards politeness seems unlikely indeed. (See also Ochs and Schieffelin, 1984, who show that surface similarities in speech behavior cannot be automatically ascribed to the same underlying motivations.)

Even a brief perusal of the literature as given above reveals a confusion regarding politeness: is it to be equated with deference, with tact, with formality, with routine formulae, with certain lexical items or syntactic constructions, with social appropriateness, with indirectness or, are there different types of politeness and if so, which of the above, if any, do they represent? And, wherein are we then to seek universals?

Politeness as socially acceptable behavior

As the preceding section illustrates, increasing concern with defining politeness has led in various directions. While the thrust of the approaches may vary, there are two identifiable threads running through most discussions: politeness as appropriateness and politeness as indexed by certain formal linguistic features.

Attempts to distinguish different types of politeness are to be lauded as a step in the right direction and have helped greatly, I believe, in sorting out some of the confusion surrounding politeness. The distinctions, however, still leave muddy waters. A major problem rests in the admixture of formal (e.g. passive voice) and functional (e.g. give deference) phenomena (cf. Ide, 1989) carried over from B/L's depiction of politeness strategies.[3] A related problem lies in the functional differences between positive and negative politeness strategies (see Coupland *et al.*, 1988). In short, it is difficult to ascertain the unifying trait(s) of phenomena termed 'polite'. How are compliments, apologies, tact, deference, intonation contours, mitigation devices, honorifics, *sir* and *thank you* to be located and defined at one taxonomic level? Distinctions between types of politeness or a continuum thereof (e.g. extensively polite vs. polite, expectation-dependent politeness types) still united under the rubric of politeness do not clear the waters. The inconsistencies found in empirical studies, discussed at length elsewhere (Meier, submitted) can be attributed to the (not surprisingly) varied operationalization of the array of different and ill-defined speech phenomena falling under the taxonomic cover of politeness.

Brown and Levinson (1987:21,22) themselves, in their introduction, prove to be the strongest critics of their own concepts: '. . . our strategies were never intended as an exhaustive taxonomy of utterance styles [. . .] and they therefore do not necessarily provide sensible categories for quantitative research'. The authors then proceed to point out that politeness 'markers' are not quantifiable signals of politeness and that the use of politeness strategies may have a motivation other than politeness. What emerges in the 1987 introduction then is a multifunctionality, a relativity, a dependency on context that makes B/L's politeness model of little more value to empirical investigation than more general concepts of politeness, but which, due to the attractiveness of misleadingly clear, delineated categories of politeness strategies, has led researchers astray in their attempts to apply the model.

I propose, therefore, that it is not different types of politeness that are called for, but rather a return to focussing on how certain linguistic features (not dubbed inherently polite or impolite) pattern and are perceived in particular contexts to fulfill certain functions. This is a quest to explore socially appropriate language behavior, which has often been lost sight of as B/L's concepts have been variously operationalized and quantified. Such a view also allows for the identification of universals in broader, more tenable terms of contextualized social interaction, avoiding ethnocentric labelling of forms and entire speech communities as polite or impolite.

What then are the implications of viewing politeness as behaving in a socially appropriate manner? First, politeness can only be judged relative to a particular

context and to particular addressees' expectations, and as such is part of utterance meaning rather than sentence meaning (cf. Zimin, 1981). It is thus dynamic (cf. Watts *et al.*, 1992), relative, and negotiable. Context and the underlying cultural assumptions that inform the perceptions thereof thus assume important roles as significant determinants of linguistic behavior, as much research on speech act behavior reveals (see, e.g. Lipson, 1994; Meier, 1994).

Certain address forms (e.g. *sir*), for example, would not be described as more polite than others, but would convey a certain amount of deference within a particular speech community. *Overpoliteness* could be a case of an excessive amount of deference being shown in a situation that warrants less. A form associated with a high degree of deference could thus be inappropriate as well as appropriate, depending on interlocutors' perceptions of a particular situation. This is also true for routine formulae (e.g. greetings) and lexical items (e.g. *please*, *thank you*). All are expected in certain contexts but also can occur inappropriately in other contexts.

Additionally, it would not make sense within such a view to assert a universal characterization of a particular speech act (e.g. apologizing, complimenting) as inherently polite or impolite. An apology or a compliment can be appropriate or inappropriate either by virtue of its occurrence or in the way it is carried out.

Neither would it make sense to speak of one speech community or language as inherently more or less polite than another. The folk notion of one culture being more or less polite can be ascribed to one language, for example, using linguistic forms which are associated with a different context and value in another speech community. Viewing politeness in terms of the interpretation of particular linguistic behavior in a given situation greatly reduces the danger of an ethnocentric bias (which perpetuates cultural stereotypes) in cross-cultural studies.

Because the perception of politeness depends on language within its social context, one is also fortunately forced to abandon misguided attempts at establishing universals using a particular speech community as the baseline, asserting, for example, that bare imperatives are impolite or that certain words or even speech acts are inherently polite or impolite. The term *politeness phenomena* as hitherto used, is thus rendered void.

Where then are universals to be sought? Because politeness as socially appropriate behavior must be viewed within a framework of social interaction, a search for universals must be found therein as well. Norms for appropriate behavior will certainly vary across cultures as will the underlying value and belief systems which, arising from an interplay of factors (e.g. political, social, historical), inform these norms.[4] What all societies do have in common, however, is the *existence* of norms for appropriate behavior. A set of norms and dependable adherence to these norms within a group engenders a structure and predictability which results in a considerable saving of energy in everyday life and can be viewed as serving the goal of something akin to social harmony and perhaps even survival.[5] Individuals are thus motivated to adhere to these norms (thereby maintaining a desired image) because of the subsequent social value and consequent 'power' they are accorded in relation to a group (cf.

Goodenough, 1981). Leech (1983:82) aptly captures this idea: 'unless you are polite to your neighbour, . . . you will no longer be able to borrow his mower'. Identifying these norms[6] and their underlying motives are tenable and valuable goals, contributing to both intra- and intercultural studies.

The concept of social appropriateness is a general one which admittedly does not provide readily quantifiable categories for quantitative research. However, as argued above, B/L's model does not do this either. It has not facilitated the hoped-for yields in empirical studies (see Meier, submitted) nor has it shown predictive claims of universals to be well-based (e.g. face, indirectness). Until a definition of politeness helps rather than hinders, there is no reason to embrace it for empirical research. We would do well to heed B/L's own caveat regarding the employment of their model.

Returning to a focus on the patterns and perceptions of appropriateness, however, does provide a functional basis of analysis, grounded in social interaction, and perhaps prevents seeking universals where there are none to be found. An appropriateness approach to politeness also avoids the unwieldy problem of determining whether certain linguistic forms are polite or not, or whether they are negative politeness strategies or positive politeness strategies. It also allows for different societal preferences (e.g. group orientation versus individual orientation) without evaluating one or the other preference as polite or impolite, direct or indirect, thereby avoiding the risk of making polar value-judgements of good or bad.

Summary

Investigations of language necessarily entail placement within a context and a society if they are to have explanatory value, be it intraculturally or interculturally. An inclusion of context and society demands a broader view of politeness as appropriateness as argued above. Seeking patterns in socially situated behavior is not a meaningless quest, but a necessary one, well worthy of further endeavor.

Conclusion

Sorting out the tangles that politeness has become enmeshed in is not an easy task. Progress is being made, however, and will continue to be made if we persist in placing language within its broader social and cultural context. It is hoped that the attempt in this paper to sort out an array of explorations of politeness will serve as an impetus for further progress.

NOTES

[1] See Shils (1968) for a detailed depiction of deference involving components of 'deference entitlements' (e.g. occupation, wealth, education) and their relational values.

[2] However, see Graddol and Swann (1989), who reject politeness theory as an explanation for gender differences in speech.

[3] See Meier (forthcoming) for a discussion calling into question Brown and Levinson's distinction between negative politeness strategies and positive politeness strategies.

[4] Norms should not be viewed here as prescriptive absolutes, but rather as *orientations* for action, along the lines of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) 'value orientations'. However, see D'Andrade (1984) for a detailed discussion of the link between norms and culture.

[5] Greenwald (1980) refers to this as 'cognitive conservatism' and Berger and Bradac (1982) as 'uncertainty reduction'.

[6] Norms are not, of course, always adhered to, and in such cases, some sort of 'remedial work' in the form of apologies, excuses, etc. is called for to repair any damage done to the transgressor's image in the group (see Meier, forthcoming).

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