Chapter 5

Being polite as a variable in speech

Key terms in this chapter:

- politeness
- face wants
- negative face
- positive face
- social distance
- negative politeness strategies
- positive politeness strategies
- power
- cost of imposition
- inherently face-threatening acts
- speech acts
- bald, on record
- sociolinguistic competence
- grammatical competence
- pragmatic competence
- contrastive analysis
- individualistic
- collectivist
- *wakimae*

INTRODUCTION

'I'll have an iced mocha', my New York friend, Ellen, said. 'An iced mocha', repeated the server. 'Do you want whipped cream on that?' 'You have to ask?' said Ellen.

Politeness is a strange thing. Clearly the server at the Michigan restaurant where this exchange took place found Ellen's reply, 'You have to ask?' and her ironic tone of voice, somewhat hard to interpret. There was a long pause while she looked at Ellen waiting for her to say something more. When Ellen said nothing and went back to studying the menu, the server finally looked at me. I raised my eyebrows and smiled slightly, and the server wrote the drink order on her notepad. Outside of New York, Ellen's answer didn't have the meaning of an enthusiastic 'yes' that it was intended to have. In Michigan, it seems waiting staff don't expect the kind of ironic jokes from strangers that you might find in talk between close friends.

Was it polite for her to say 'You have to ask?' like that? Your answer probably depends on where you grew up and what norms of politeness you acquired there. In many places, a reply like this would be considered terribly rude, and something like 'Yes, please' or 'Yes, thank you' would be expected. But by the standards of where Ellen grew up, she *was* being polite. By making a joke – moreover, a joke that suggests that the answer to her question is already shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer – she was working to construct the business exchange in more friendly and intimate terms.

exercise

Intuitive notions of politeness

List five things that you consider *polite* and five things you consider *impolite*. (Decide beforehand if you will restrict yourself and focus only on talk or include other behaviours.)

Compare your lists with someone else's. Do you both agree entirely on what is polite/impolite?

What seems to be the main thing you were paying attention to when you drew up your lists?

As we will see in the discussion of speech levels in the next chapter, some languages even have different words for the same thing that have to be chosen depending on what the politeness and respect relationship is between the speakers. In Japanese, the form of some verbs, including the verb 'to eat' changes entirely, as you can see in the following example (the root form for 'eat' is shown in bold in each sentence):

(1)

Tanaka: Sensei, keeki **meshiagari**-mas-u-ka?
Teacher cake eat(honorific)-polite-non.past-Q
'Teacher, would you like some cake?'

Professor: Ee, **tabe**-mas-u. Tanaka-san wa?
Yes, eat-polite-non.past. Tanaka-san TOPIC
'Yes, I'll have some. Will you, Tanaka?'

Tanaka: Hai, **itadaki**-mas-u. Doomo.
Yes eat(humble)-polite-non.past. Thanks.
'Yes, I'll have some. Thank you.'

(Adapted from Tsujimura 1996)

Here the student, Tanaka, uses the honorific form for 'eat' in his question. It is called an honorific form because it is used to show respect for the person who is (or will be) eating. The professor replies with the unmarked form (i.e., it makes no claims one way or another about the status of the person eating), and then Tanaka answers him using the form for 'eat' that indicates that Tanaka humbles himself with respect to his professor.

As you can see, regardless of which form of 'eat' they use, both Tanaka and his professor add a polite suffix, *-mas-*, on the verb, and the professor uses the respectful suffix *-san* when addressing Tanaka. Japanese requires speakers to make such decisions about what verb form to use, and what kind of suffixes to attach to verbs and nouns in everyday speech. Showing this kind of attention to each other and evaluating your relationship with your interlocutors in a particular place or at a particular time is, in a very general sense, what it means to be polite. To put it another way, we could say that Japanese speakers have to be very discerning: they have to be sensitive to the social significance of the relationships and settings they find themselves in and be able to appropriately draw on the conventions for use of honorifics in those settings. Later in this chapter, we will find that some Japanese sociolinguists consider an ability to apply *discernment* to be a key constraint on polite behaviour in Japanese society more generally.

This chapter considers how sociolinguists might handle the phenomenon of **politeness**. We exercise many choices in how we express things, depending on what is expected of us

Politeness

The actions taken by competent speakers in a community in order to attend to possible social or interpersonal disturbance. (See also *Wakimae*.)

exercise

Speech levels or respect in English vocabulary

English doesn't have speech levels or special respectful vocabulary to the same extent that Japanese and Sasak do (see discussion in Chapter 6). But we do have some areas of the vocabulary where we use euphemisms or avoidance strategies according to where we are or who we are talking to.

Make up a list of terms you know to say:

(i) someone has died;
(ii) someone has vomited;
(iii) someone is wealthy;
(iv) someone is attractive to you.

Now annotate each term according to where, when and who you would use it with.

(what is conventionally polite in that situation) and what we want to achieve with our interlocutor (how much we want to enhance our relationship with the individual we're talking to). There are many approaches to politeness in the linguistics literature. Some of them emphasise our social obligations to others and therefore focus more on how politeness recognises and strengthens those social obligations and our sense of shared group membership. Some of them emphasise our individual autonomy and hence these approaches focus more on how polite behaviour seems to offset or compensate for restrictions on our freedom of action. Though some of the debates in politeness theory have at times become quite passionate (while, of course, remaining expertly civil), I think there is a middle ground of major principles most researchers agree on, which nevertheless allows for some differences.

THEORIES OF POLITENESS

There are a number of different ways in which linguists can analyse politeness. The various approaches differ primarily in the emphasis placed on the speaker, the addressee (or both), and the emphasis they give to accounting for behaviour that would be considered polite or behaviour that would be considered impolite. Many of the frameworks that are accessible to readers of English or other European languages have made the speaker central to the analysis rather than the addressee, and though they have tried to take into account the relationship between speaker and hearer, this has been limited by the focus on the speaker as a linguistic agent planning and evaluating their next move in a conversation. More recently, work by Japanese, Chinese, African and Middle Eastern scholars has begun to make more of an impact on the field of politeness studies. As a general rule, these researchers have emphasised the empirical and theoretical importance of seeing politeness and impoliteness as acts which involve consideration of the addressee's wants and desires as well as the speaker's own, and acts that involve consideration of the demands of the larger social group in which both the speaker and addressee have grown up and been socialised.

Connections with theory

The philosopher Adam Smith is (at this point in time) most strongly associated with his theory of the 'invisible hand' driving a free market economy. However, Smith's philosophy was more broad-ranging than this. His theories of a free market were balanced with an acute interest in the moral constraints that bind members of society to one another. He identified one natural constraint on human nature like this:

> Nature, when she formed man for society, endowed him with an original desire to please, and an original aversion to offend his brethren. She taught him to feel pleasure in their favourable, and pain in their unfavourable regard. (Smith 1853: 170)

Ariely (2008) suggests this desire to please others is the source of polite behaviour (and, as we will see, most theories of politeness agree that politeness is often about fostering favourable regard or pleasure in others). Ariely reviews experimental data that suggest simply getting people to *think* about politeness enhances their willingness to act politely (Bargh *et al.* 1996). This is reminiscent of *attunement*, discussed in Chapter 4.

Undoubtedly, the most influential framework for analysing politeness is the approach outlined by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson (Brown and Levinson 1987). Its position in the field is so dominant that researchers who want to propose alternative treatments of politeness are obliged to state how and why they consider their framework preferable to Brown and Levinson's. Geoffrey Leech (2007), for instance, proposes a general statement of what politeness is. He proposes that an action or utterance is polite if it does one of two things: if the speaker 'expresses or implies meanings that associate high value with what pertains to [someone else – usually the addressee], or associates low value with what pertains to [the speaker her/himself]' (2007: 181). Leech suggests that this definition is broad enough to encompass the different ways politeness is manifested cross-culturally.

Leech uses the somewhat archaic phrasing *what pertains to* because he wants a very general description that will encompass the ways we politely express value about many different kinds of things, not just possessions or looks: we can be polite in regard to other people's needs or desires or their personal qualities; politeness can recognise obligations that exist between speakers; politeness can be about acknowledging other people's opinions and feelings (2007: 182). In this chapter, we will examine a couple of examples of different ways in which people can express politeness. One focuses on politeness that is oriented to people's needs or wants (how we can make requests politely or impolitely), and also politeness that is more concerned with people's obligations to each other (how we make an apology). These examples by no means exhaust the cross-cultural options for politeness – they don't touch on the use of honorifics that are conventionally required when talking about other people and things in many Asian languages (we saw alternation between plain, humble and honorific verb forms in Japanese in example 1, but honorifics can permeate the utterance through much more than just verb choice). However, requests and apologies are good case studies for looking at politeness because they will allow us to review some of the main principles in Brown and Levinson's groundbreaking work and they will allow us to return to

Leech's more general perspective on politeness as being concerned with different ways of associating high value with others.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Under Brown and Levinson's framework for analysing politeness, it is important to realise that both a deferential response and a joking response (as with Ellen's reply asking for whipped cream on her coffee) can be analysed as forms of politeness. Most people associate 'politeness' just with ways of speaking that avoid causing offence by showing deference to another person. But Brown and Levinson point out that in any speech community, in some contexts, deference would be inappropriate. Instead, comments that orient to ingroup membership may be what oil the wheels of an interaction and avoid causing offence. If Ellen had replied 'Well, if it's not too much trouble, I would be terribly grateful', such extreme deference would have also been peculiar, and perhaps even been interpreted as snobbish and perhaps quite impolite and rude.

Brown and Levinson's goal was to provide a framework for analysing politeness that could accommodate considerations like this, and that might also provide a basis for discussing similarities and differences between cultures in how politeness works.

'Face' and politeness

Face and face wants

Erving Goffman's notion of face, our social persona, adopted into politeness theory. Face wants are the desire to protect our *positive face* and *negative face* from threat or damage.

Brown and Levinson's approach to politeness relies on the fundamental notion of **face**. This technical use of the term 'face' is very similar to the way the word is used metaphorically in many varieties of English. If, for example, someone comes to a meeting unprepared and attention is drawn to their lack of preparation, you could say that person had 'lost face'. Similarly, if I do something embarassing in public, and you distract attention or say something to minimise the seriousness of what I did, you could say that you had 'saved my face'. (I'm told this use of the term may be less common in North American English than it is in other varieties.)

The notion of 'face' can be traced back to work by the sociologist Erving Goffman, who used the term to discuss some of the constraints on social interaction. (We noted Goffman's contribution to sociolinguistics in Chapter 3 as well.) In Goffman's work, 'face' was a personal attribute or quality that each of us works to protect or enhance. However, crucially, face is something that we only possess if it is recognised or granted to us by others in our community. Brown and Levinson narrowed this down somewhat, and their definition of 'face' emphasises less the interpersonal and communal nature of face wants. They propose that we want to guard our face against possible damage when we interact with others. The reason that we are polite is that we are concerned with maintaining two distinct kinds of face:

Negative face

The want of every competent adult member of a community that their actions be unimpeded by others. 'Don't tread on me.'

Positive face

The want of every competent adult member of a community that their wants be desirable to at least some others. 'Love me, love my dog.'

(2)

- **Negative face** is the want of every competent adult member of a community that their actions be unimpeded by others.
- **Positive face** is the want of every member that their wants be desirable to at least some others.

(Brown and Levinson 1987: 62)

Notice the qualification that face wants are something 'competent adults' in a community have. In other words, we have to learn or acquire negative and positive face wants. Virtually all major researchers on politeness agree that the notion of face is important to politeness theory (even if they don't all agree on the need to distinguish positive and negative face).

No, really?

What is and is not considered polite varies, of course, from place to place. Politeness conventions emerge gradually and consensually. A competent member of Arab society, for example, knows it is terribly rude to show the soles of your feet to someone. But in some cases, a ruling is required on whether a word or activity is impolite or not. Such a case occurred when one MP in the New Zealand Parliament referred to another MP as a *wanker*. The epithet was licensed in the end, on the grounds that the dictionary defined *wanker* as 'a pretentious person' (Burchfield 1986).

In societies where interactions between strangers are conventionally oriented more to be deferential (that is, paying more attention to negative face wants), it seems very rude to ignore the distance there might be between you and your addressee and to talk as if you know her or him better than you do (we will define this notion of **social distance** more fully in the section 'Choosing politeness strategies' on p. 87). A strong European stereotype of Asian politeness is that social conventions require Asian speakers to pay more attention to the hearer's negative face wants than, say, French society requires French speakers to. And in example (1) we saw some instances of the overt strategies required in Japanese to show that the speaker is deferential to (or respectful of) their addressee. These include the use of honorific address forms, humbling forms of the verb, and suffixes indicating politeness. These are all particularly noticeable to Western learners of the language and quite hard to master well. However, even within Europe, some speech communities are stereotyped as being more deference-oriented than others, e.g., the idea that Germans are more 'stand-offish' and Italians are more 'friendly'.

Social distance

See *Distance*.

In Japan, students would usually address a university professor by his or her last name and then they will add the honorific suffix *-sensei* (meaning 'teacher'). By emphasising the social distance between the student and the professor, it attends to both parties' negative face wants. The situation in Germany is analogous. There, students and more junior faculty members typically address university professors by their full professional titles. This means that if you are addressing a full professor who has a Ph.D., and who has also been awarded an honorary degree from another university, you are expected to use all those titles when you greet them: *Guten Tag, Frau Professor Doktor Doktor Nussbaum* ('Good afternoon Ms Professor, Doctor, Doctor Nussbaum').

CHAPTER 5. RSR

Contrasting with this are societies where interactions between strangers are expected to be more personable and friendly (that is, where they often attend more directly to positive face wants), and it would be considered rude to talk in ways that emphasise or draw attention to the social distance between the interlocutors. The stereotype about Australians is that they are much more chummy and informal than other English speakers, i.e., more attentive to addressing positive face wants.

Negative politeness strategies

An action, phrase or utterance that indicates attention is being paid to the *negative face wants* of an *interlocutor*. Often achieved through shows of deference. One type of action available to mitigate an *inherently face-threatening act*. (See also *Positive politeness strategies*.)

Positive politeness strategies

An action, phrase or utterance that indicates attention is being paid to the *positive face wants* of an *interlocutor*. Often achieved through shows of friendliness. One type of action available to mitigate an *inherently face-threatening act*. (See also *Negative politeness strategy*.)

This greater orientation to positive face wants means that use of first names is the norm, even in professional contexts in much of the English-speaking world (though this seems to still be true more in North American and Australasian universities than in UK universities). This tendency interacts with other social factors, such as the addressee's age and sex. For example, younger university professors are more likely to be addressed by their first name than their older colleagues are. Moreover, many women report an asymmetry between the way that they are addressed (e.g., 'First Name' or 'Mrs + Surname') and their male peers (e.g., 'Title + Surname'). The fact that the politeness strategies speakers choose depends on their evaluation of a number of social factors is an important point that we will return to shortly, and later in the chapter we will also return to the broad social stereotypes that have provided us with our examples here and find that they too are not so straightforward.

The specific linguistic and non-linguistic strategies that display attention to either the speaker's or the addressee's face wants can therefore be referred to as '**positive**' and '**negative politeness strategies**'. Even a very brief exchange such as a greeting can illustrate some of the different linguistic strategies used to express the two kinds of politeness. For example, suppose you were passing by the outdoor tables of a coffee shop and you recognise an old friend who you haven't seen for some time. You might call out to them using a nickname:

(3) 'Mouse! I haven't seen you in years. You look terrific! What are you up to?'

Brown and Levinson provide an extensive list of linguistic strategies that express positive politeness, several of which are illustrated in this example. The use of ingroup code (here, a nickname *Mouse*), showing attention to the addressee's interests (*what are you up to?*) and exaggerating the speaker's interest or approval (*you look terrific!*) are all strategies that attend to the addressee's positive face wants.

Other greetings attend more to the hearer's negative face wants, for example:

(4) 'Excuse me, Dr Michaels, I'm sorry but could I just interrupt you for one moment?'

The politeness strategies in (4) include a deferential form of address (*Dr Michaels*), an apology (*Excuse me; I'm sorry*) and an attempt to minimise the request (*just; one moment*). These are negative politeness strategies because they attend to the addressee's negative face wants, that is, to their desire to be left alone to pursue their own actions or interests unimpeded.

You can see how Leech would subsume both these under his general definition of politeness – say or do something that indicates you place high value on what pertains to the addressee and low value with what is associated with the speaker. In (3), the speaker gives several indications that she values the addressee's company, looks, interests and attention as well as their shared history (use of a nickname can suggest this). In (4), the speaker indicates that he places high value on the addressee's time, their social status (through use of the respectful address term) and low value on what he's saying (his apology *I'm sorry* suggests his interruption and request might be something other people would frown on).

exercise

Orienting to different kinds of politeness

Would you say that the community you grew up in was oriented more to negative or positive politeness? What are some examples of behaviour supporting this?

How does it compare with other places where you have lived or that you are familiar with? Have you ever found yourself living somewhere where the general orientation to positive or negative politeness was different to the norms you grew up with?

Did this cause you problems? How did you resolve them (if at all)?

Choosing politeness strategies: power, distance and cost of the imposition

Our decisions about exactly what kinds of strategies would be polite or impolite in a given situation involve an evaluation of a number of different factors. Brown and Levinson identify three specific factors. We consider how great a **power** difference there is between the speaker and the addressee; we consider how great the social **distance** is between the speaker and the addressee; and we evaluate the **cost of the imposition** (I have modified their terminology very slightly here).

We generally put more effort into being polite to people who are in positions of greater social power than we are. For instance, I am more polite to the government official processing my passport application than I am to the telemarketer who rings me during dinner. That is because I want the official in the passport office to do me a favour and speed up my application, but when the telemarketer rings me I am the one with the power and they need something from me. That is the effect of power on politeness.

Similarly, the social distance between speakers has a tremendous impact on how they speak to each other. We are generally more polite to people who we don't know very well, and we generally feel we can be more abrupt with people who are close friends. If you are cooking a meal with a close friend or family member, you might simply say 'You've got the butter' instead of 'I think the butter is closer to you than it is to me, so could you pass it to me'. However, if you are working on a task with someone you are not so close to, you might ask in a less direct way, showing more attention to their negative face wants – 'Excuse me, are those the telephone accounts? Could I have them for a second?'

Power

A vertical relationship between speaker and hearer in Brown and Levinson's theory of *politeness*. Along with *distance* and *cost of imposition*, power determines how much and what kind of redressive action the speaker might take with a face-threatening act.

Cost of imposition

Modified term from Brown and Levinson's *politeness* theory. A scalar measure of how serious a *face-threatening act* is in a particular society, and given the *power* and *distance* difference between speaker and hearer.

No, really?

Being family members doesn't necessarily mean you can assume closeness. In a lot of places, some kinship relationships are conventionally considered respectful ones, and you must use respect forms when addressing that member of your family.

In Tamambo (spoken in Vanuatu), a mother's brother is addressed with *kamim* and the subject agreement marker *no-* ('you, plural') as a show of respect (like *vous* in French) (Jauncey 1997: 107).

The third factor that Brown and Levinson believed was important in order to understand the different politeness strategies people use was how big the social infraction is. This was what they meant by the cost of the imposition. So, to continue the example of requests that we have been looking at, different requests have different social weight. Asking someone for the time is generally considered a minor imposition. As a consequence, you can ask complete strangers for the time and the politeness strategies we use pay relatively little attention to face wants, e.g., 'Sorry, do you have the time?' or even just 'What's the time?' However, asking for money is generally considered a greater imposition, and usually you would only do this with someone you are fairly close to. And the more money you want to request, the better you will probably want to know them. For example, in the last few months I have found myself needing 5 pence so I can get the bus home and I borrowed this from an acquaintance, but the day when I left my credit cards at home I had to ask a very close friend to lend me enough money to buy my groceries.

No, really?

In many languages in Vanuatu, polite registers or respectful ways of speaking are spoken of in terms of 'heaviness'. So, in Mwotlap, spoken in the north, the phrase is *hohole map* ('talk respectfully, lit. heavy'), which shows that the speaker 'thinks heavy' (*dēm map*), or respects the addressee or the person being talked about. The metaphor of heaviness carries over into the English-lexified creole, Bislama, where *ting hevi* alternates with the more English *rispektem.*

exercise

Costs of an imposition

How would you rank the cost of the imposition involved in asking someone to:

(i) check on your flat or house while you are on holiday,
(ii) feed your pets and water the plants, and
(iii) answer and deal with any mail?

What are the ways in which you can try to address the differences in cost to them?

So under this framework there are three social variables that shape how people choose which politeness strategies they will use. Their attention to others' positive and negative face wants will be determined by the relative power and social distance of the interactants, and by the social cost of the imposition. As a number of people working within this framework have noted, the three factors are by no means independent. You are often not very close to someone who is in a position of power or authority over you, so power and distance are overlapping measures. And how we evaluate cost is also partly a function of interlocutors' social distance or the power one interlocutor has over the other. This was shown clearly in

the examples I gave in the last paragraph, where the scenarios I drew on to illustrate the notion of cost made direct reference to how well I knew the person I was borrowing money from. Similarly, we do not feel that asking someone to tell you the time carries much cost for a number of reasons. One is that the time is not considered to be privileged property of anyone (if you give me the time, I haven't taken it away from you), nor is the activity particularly onerous (it takes moments to either tell me the time or say that you don't know). But it is also relatively low in cost because it doesn't change anything about the social order in doing so. The social distance and relative power of everyone involved remain unchanged.

Despite this lack in independence, I believe they are still useful factors for us to bear in mind when we consider the variable ways in which people are polite or impolite to each other.

Inherently face-threatening acts

Brown and Levinson suggest that some conversational events are **inherently face-threatening acts** (FTAs). That is, if you decide to undertake one of these conversational events, somebody's positive or negative face wants will be threatened (sometimes it will be the speaker's, sometimes it will be the hearer's). This means that whenever someone chooses to engage in one of these conversational acts, the participants have to negotiate an appropriate level of politeness.

Inherently face-threatening acts

Speech acts which necessarily threaten the speaker's and/or hearer's *positive face* and/or *negative face*. In Brown and Levinson's framework, they require the speaker to decide whether or not to mitigate the threat and which *politeness strategies* to use.

Connections with theory

The term 'face-threatening *act*' builds on the notion of **speech acts** from the field of semantics and pragmatics. Naming something, wagering something, requesting something, are considered speech *acts* because when said they perform some activity. Saying 'I bet you . . .' lays a wager; saying 'We'll call the bear Erasmus' names the bear, and so forth. Some of the face-threatening acts discussed in the politeness literature are classic examples of speech acts. But some vary a lot in their syntactic form, e.g., an apology can take a number of forms – some direct and some indirect – and still be considered an apology.

Speech acts

Utterances which, in saying, do something.

Table 5.1 gives some examples of different kinds of speech acts that Brown and Levinson claim inherently threaten either the addressee's or the speakers' face wants. Giving an order or making a request are both threats to the addressee's face wants, and so are expressions of disagreement. But giving an order threatens the addressee's negative face wants because it is at odds with their desire to have their actions unimpeded, while expressing disagreement threatens their positive face wants because it is at odds with their desire to have their wants seen as desirable by others (if I don't agree with you then at least some of what you want is not desirable to me).

The table also reminds us that some politeness strategies are speaker-centred and attend to the speaker's face wants. This is shown in the bottom row of the table, where expressing thanks and making an apology are identified as examples of threats to the speaker's face wants. Saying 'thank you' establishes indebtedness to the other person,

facts

A compliment can have a serious impact on the addressee's desire to have their actions proceed unimpeded. In some societies, there is an obligation or strong expectation to offer the speaker something they have complimented.

Table 5.1 Examples of inherently face-threatening acts illustrating threats to positive and negative face of speaker or hearer. (Source, Brown and Levinson 1987: 65–68.)

	Type of face threatened	
Whose face is threatened	*Negative face*	*Positive face*
Addressee	Orders or requests Threats or warnings Compliments, or expressions of envy	Disapproval or criticisms Disagreements Bringing bad news about H, or good news about S Non-cooperation, like interrupting
Speaker	Accepting an apology Saying *thank you*	Making an apology Showing lack of (physical or emotional) control

hence a speaker may be setting themself up to have their actions impeded at some time in the future.

Making an apology is a threat to the speaker's positive face because it involves going on record with the fact that we have done something that is socially frowned on. In other words, you have to state publicly that you did something stupid or unkind or tasteless. For example, you apologise if you forget your partner's birthday, or put a dent in your friend's car. If you are on record as having acted stupidly, unkindly or tastelessly, then other people are unlikely to identify with you. Hence they will be unwilling to suggest that they share your wants and desires since it is now a matter of public record that your actions include things like this.

exercise

Untangling face threats

Whose face is threatened if someone starts to speak and instead burps loudly? Why?

Can you think of cases where an interruption is *not* a threat to the addressee's positive face?

Why do you think a compliment or expression of envy constitutes a threat to the addressee's negative face?

Bald, on record

A technical term in Brown and Levinson's theory of *politeness*. Refers to an *inherently face-threatening act* made without any softening through *positive* or *negative politeness strategies*. Notice they do not call this 'impolite'.

Depending on how serious an FTA is, it will require more or less action to mitigate (or reduce) the potential damage to the addressee's or the speaker's face. At one extreme, an extremely trivial FTA can simply be done without requiring very much mitigating action. Brown and Levinson call this 'going **on record**' or doing the FTA '**baldly**'. Going on record means that the speaker simply does the face-threatening act and doesn't wrap it up with any positive or negative politeness strategies.

At the other extreme, an FTA might be judged to be so serious that the speaker simply cannot bear to undertake it – in this case, silence, or self-censorship, is the ultimate mitigation. In between, various kinds of actions can be taken to redress or mitigate potential damage to either participant's face. This includes hinting at or indirectly committing the FTA, or doing

things that directly attend to either positive or negative face wants. We will shortly see some specific examples of all these strategies and this will help to ground the theory in everyday language use.

In Figure 5.1, FTAs are shown from most to least threatening. The kinds of actions associated are shown on the lower edge of the figure, roughly corresponding to being increasingly polite. We will be principally concerned with discussing the last four, since they have overt linguistic consequences. We will have less comment on the option that involves not saying anything; but just as we have seen that linguistic variables may involve an alternation between presence and absence of a sound, absence of an FTA is sociolinguistically meaningful.

However, it is worth noting that there is a problem with trying to analyse absent FTAs, and this highlights the difference between what we are doing when we analyse variation in how people are polite and variation in how people pronounce words. The difference is quite simple and depends on whether there is a predictable context in which the variable occurs. For example, it is possible to describe each and every context in which (r) could occur and then we can investigate whether for each context it is present or absent. In Chapter 2, we called this the envelope of variation. But there is no clear envelope of variation for FTAs. We can't predict when FTAs will occur, so when an FTA is not present in conversation we don't usually know whether a speaker thought of undertaking the FTA, and then chose silence as the option for mitigating it, or whether the speaker simply didn't think of undertaking the FTA in the first place.

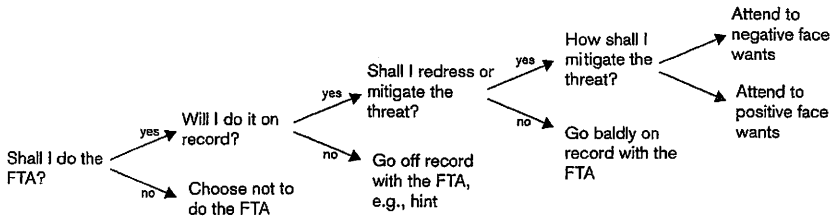

Figure 5.1 Flow-chart showing conscious or subconscious decisions leading to choice of a particular politeness strategy. (Adapted from Brown and Levinson 1987: 69.)

Brown and Levinson presented these different strategies as being the rational outcomes selected by speakers as they evaluate the social dynamics of a situation. Figure 5.1 shows how different outcomes might arise from the speaker asking her or himself different questions.

Some examples of going baldly on record with an FTA will illustrate how strategy is typically associated with impositions that have very low cost or might be uttered in a context where the interlocutors are working on a task together (so social distance would be low). In the examples in (5), the FTA is identified as in Table 5.1:

(5) What's the time? (*request*)
Pass the salt. (*order*)
You've got toothpaste on your shirt. (*criticism* or *bad news about H*)
It's not ready yet. (*warning*)

Going bald or on record means saying what you want to say without couching the statement or utterance in any politeness strategies. However, a lot of FTAs are couched in some form of redressive or mitigating action. If you want to redress the threat to someone's negative face you might qualify the FTA in some way. For example, you might suggest that the addressee has options in how they respond to it, or you might minimise the FTA, show deference or depersonalise it. In (6), both the type of FTA and the redressive action (underlined in the examples) are identified:

(6) Could you tell me the time? (*request: does not assume compliance*)
There's something on your shirt. (*bad news about H: minimise; depersonalise*)
Gentlemen, you can't park there. (*warning: show deference*)

In theory, you can use positive and negative politeness strategies to offset the potential damage of any FTA. You don't have to use negative politeness with a negative face threat, or positive politeness strategies with a positive face threat. Compare the examples in (6) with the very similar examples in (7):

(7) Pass the salt, honey? (*request: ingroup identity marker*)
I like the new Jackson Pollock look with your shirt. (*bad news about H: show attention to positive face wants; share joke*)
For your safety and the safety of others, do not inflate the life vest until you leave the aircraft. (*warning* or *order: give reason; be inclusive*)

The face threat associated with a request or order can be mitigated by negative or positive politeness, as can the face threat associated with bringing bad news about your addressee. Which strategy the speaker chooses will depend on the roles of the interlocutors, and how great they believe the FTA is under the circumstances.

Brown and Levinson's approach doesn't have much to say about when and why someone might choose to mitigate an FTA with positive versus negative politeness strategies. This seems rather unsatisfying, given that the distinction between positive and negative face/politeness is the heart of their theory. In this area, too, Leech's point that politeness is about the speaker displaying a high regard for the other and a low regard for the self again shows its strength. By not 'over-engineering' his theory, Leech proposes that we might analyse *all* the examples in (6) and (7) according to one over-arching principle: a speaker is polite if high value is afforded to the addressee's opinions, self-regard, actions, and relationships with others (and low value is associated with the speaker's own actions, self-regard etc.). In this respect, Leech's approach has a simplicity that Brown and Levinson's lacks.

Another thing that Brown and Levinson's model has relatively little to say about is cases where there is a notable absence of face work, or where face *attacks* are actively pursued. There is a growing literature on *im*politeness in settings like sports teams, game shows, the military, and intimate groups of friends (e.g. Pilkington 1998, Culpeper 2005, Holmes 2006). This work argues quite reasonably that impoliteness is not always the failure to be polite, sometimes it directly serves the main goals of an interaction. Scott Kiesling (2001) looks at some examples of interaction between a university student he calls Pete and other members of Pete's fraternity from a college in Virginia (on the outskirts of Washington D.C.). Although Kiesling doesn't frame his analysis of Pete's interactional style primarily in terms of politeness, some of the examples he analyses include repeated unmitigated face-threatening acts (e.g. warnings, criticisms of the hearer). There is also repeated use of socially tabooed address

terms and commentaries on others' abilities (i.e. things that do not conventionally suggest the speaker attaches high value to the addressee's opinions or desires). Nevertheless, Kiesling argues that these strategies are all acceptable and highly instrumental ways of adopting the kind of authoritative stances or social roles that are valued in the fraternity. Holmes (2006) discusses how some workplaces are characterised by this kind of face-attacking culture as well.

Some case studies of the theory at work

Let's look at how Brown and Levinson's system operates by examining some specific examples of what would be considered face-threatening acts. The first one we will consider is making a request or giving an order. As we have seen, these present a potential threat to the addressee's negative face wants, because they necessarily involve infringing on the addressee's actions by getting them to do something they had not planned to do. The second example is an apology which presents a threat to the speaker's positive face since it involves admitting to having done something socially frowned upon.

Here is the scenario for the request or order. It's a bitterly cold day and the room you are in has a window open. You feel like you are freezing. The open window is much closer to your friend Sam than it is to you. You can:

Say nothing and keep on freezing	**Don't do the FTA**
	Do the FTA but redress the threat to face:
'Isn't it cold in here?'	**Off record (hint)**
'I'm sorry. Could you do me a favour and shut the window?'	**Negative politeness**
'You look cold, Sam. Should we shut the window?'	**Positive politeness**
	Do the FTA without redress to face:
'Shut the window, Sam.'	**Bald request/order**

I think it's pretty straightforward to see how the bald, on record order (*Shut the window*) is simply a case of doing the FTA without any redressive action. Likewise, it's fairly clear how sitting there and freezing is a case of choosing not to do the FTA (make a request). The other three examples might need a little more explaining.

Isn't it cold in here? (or *Is anyone cold?*) is an off-record way of making the request. All it does is hint that something (e.g. an open window) might be making people cold. A reasonable person might infer from this that the speaker intends something to happen as a result of making this observation and so they might get up to close the window.

Connections with theory

When we infer that the speaker means something beyond what they have literally said, we can be said to be drawing a *conversational implicature*. For example, when speakers

say something that seems to be irrelevant to the matter at hand, when they say something that seems to be simply wrong, or when they are unnecessarily wordy or abrupt, our default assumption is that they are not deliberately being uncooperative, so they must want us to draw some kind of inference that goes beyond the literal meaning of what they have said. Grice called these inferences conversational implicatures (as distinct from conventional implicatures, which are introduced by the semantics). Leech (2007) offers a good account of how we can understand something *is* polite in terms of the implicatures generated.

You look cold, Sam. Should we shut the window? is categorised as a positive politeness strategy because it has several markers that suggest shared interests or ingroup membership (which is what positive face is all about). These include taking the addressee's perspective (*you look cold*) and suggesting joint action (*we shut the window*).

I'm sorry. Could you do me a favour and shut the window? is categorised as a negative politeness strategy because by asking the question (*Could you...*), the speaker technically leaves open the possibility that the addressee might say no, and continue doing what they were doing – in other words, their actions might remain unimpeded by someone else's wants or desires. This is what negative face is all about. Phrasing the question in the past tense (*could you* versus *can you*) is a conventional way English distances the addressee even further from a query about ability (thereby adding to the sense that the addressee's wants and desires might proceed unimpeded by your request). Using an apology in advance of the request (*I'm sorry*) signals that the speaker is aware that their next move somehow constitutes a social infraction. What is the infraction? The request itself, since asking someone to stop doing what they are occupied with and do something else is to disturb them and prevent them from going about their business unimpeded. There is even more going on in this example, but the exercise that follows this discussion will explore other aspects of these requests.

Now consider the scenario for the apology. A friend asked you to look after her tropical fish while she was on holiday. You overfed them and they died. You can:

exercise

Linguistic features expressing attention to face wants

Underline the specific linguistic phrases or features that mitigate the threat to the addressee's negative face wants in two of the formulations of a request that we just looked at:

I'm sorry. Could you do me a favour and shut the window?
You look cold, Sam. Should we shut the window?

Explain why these phrases or features constitute negative politeness strategies or positive politeness strategies, as discussed in the text.

Now explain whose positive or negative face wants are being attended to with these specific linguistic features. Is it always the addressee's face wants, or do some of the politeness strategies attend to the speaker's face wants? Which ones, and how?

exercise

Manipulating cost of an imposition

Try increasing the cost of the imposition and see what different kinds of politeness work you have to imagine doing. Instead of asking for a fairly trivial service (like shutting the window), imagine asking someone for:

- money: £1 vs £100/$1 vs $100
- a ride in their car: they drop you off on the way home vs a special trip
- access to space they are in: crossing someone's path in the street vs use of a terminal in a busy computer lab.

Say nothing *or*
Tell her that it was the fishes' fault, they ate too much. — **Don't do the FTA**

Do the FTA but redress the threat to face:

'These fish are awfully hard to look after, aren't they, no matter how hard you try?' — **Off record (be vague)**

'I'm sorry your fish died. I'd like to replace them, if I can.' — **Negative politeness**

'I hate having to tell you this, but your beautiful fish died while you were gone. Can we replace them?' — **Positive politeness**

Do the FTA without redress to face:

'Sorry. I killed your fish.' — **Bald apology**

Now try increasing the power differential between you and the fish owner. Imagine that instead of being a close friend's fish, they belonged to one of your university professors. You will probably find yourself tying yourself in complicated knots as you try and attend to both their negative and positive face wants and your own.

As we noted earlier, people sometimes pay attention to both positive and negative face wants in the same sentence. In addition, they can pay attention to both the speaker *and* the addressee's face wants in one utterance. For example, the request that started 'I'm sorry, could you do me a favour . . .' was categorised as negative politeness. Certainly, it is true that this whole formula shows acute sensitivity to the addressee's right and desire to have their actions unimpeded: the formulaic apology (*'I'm sorry'*) makes clear that the speaker understands they are disturbing the addressee's right to have their actions unimpeded. And yet, as we have also seen, an apology constitutes a threat to the speaker's positive face. In this case it signals that the speaker is about to do something to disturb the social peace.

One advantage of representing the system as in Figure 5.1, is that it indicates a bit more clearly that politeness does not work via a set of checks and balances. In other words, whether a speaker uses strategies that pay attention to positive or negative face wants is not dependent on what kind of face is threatened by the FTA. A potential threat to the addressee's

negative face can be redressed with positive politeness strategies (and you would certainly have noticed this if you did the exercise analysing request forms in more detail), just as we saw that the face threat of an apology can be attended to and reduced with negative politeness strategies, e.g., 'I'd like to replace them'. That is because the offer to replace the fish puts the speaker under further, future obligations – i.e., it impedes their own future actions.

APPLICATIONS OF POLITENESS THEORY: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

We have noted on several occasions that there are significant differences in how the basic elements of the system – power, social distance, and cost of the imposition – are calculated in different groups. The differences can account for a good deal of variation in how politeness is realised. This raises the interesting question of whether Brown and Levinson's framework can be used to better understand what happens when speakers from different social or cultural backgrounds interact. Some researchers have found this framework useful for deconstructing problems and misunderstandings in how politeness is expressed in cross-cultural situations. In this section, we will look at one such example.

At the start of the chapter, we contrasted the politeness norms for speakers from different sociolinguistic backgrounds. For example, we briefly considered the differences in how students address university professors in English-speaking universities and in German universities. What happens when people who have acquired the politeness norms of one community find themselves in a completely different community? At a superficial level, such intercultural contact often reinforces stereotypes about groups, e.g., New Zealanders' and Australians' perceptions that the English are distant and unfriendly can perhaps be reduced to a difference in what the conventional assumptions are about the social distance between new acquaintances. These differences can lead to misunderstandings between individuals: an Australian working in England may interpret English social distance as indicating that co-workers don't like them as a person.

Intercultural contact can create some quite interesting day-to-day dilemmas for individuals. What happens, for instance, when Japanese students who are used to attending overtly to the negative face wants of their professors move to the US or New Zealand, where the norms are more geared towards attention to positive face wants – e.g., through reciprocal use of first names? This can present them with a clash between their own sociolinguistic norms and the norms of the community they are now sudying in. They can respond to this dilemma in a number of ways. One would be to remain true to the politeness norms they grew up with, and to continue to use the most respectful address forms available to them in English (e.g., *Professor Thompson* or *Dr Heycock*), or they can adopt the foreign norms and address their professors as *Roumi* or *Dave*.

Along the way to resolving this issue there can be a stage in which there is some uncertainty, and these points are particularly interesting for the sociolinguist because they highlight both the enormous creativity of language users and the ways in which their creativity can be constrained by the systems that they are most familiar with (this issue will be explored again in Chapter 11). One example was the way that Japanese students in linguistics at the University of Hawai'i converged on a short-term solution that satisfied both US and Japanese sociolinguistic norms.

The Japanese norms for interacting with professors are to use deferential forms of address, such as *(Last Name) + Title*, as Tanaka does in the example at the start of the

chapter when he calls his professor *Sensei* ('teacher'). At the University of Hawai'i, however, most graduate students would call professors by their first name, especially a younger professor. For a period, the Japanese students in linguistics took to calling the youngest professor by her first name, but they would add the respectful address term *sensei* to it at the end. For example, instead of the canonical Japanese form, *Yoshimi-sensei* ('Professor Yoshimi'), they used *Patricia-sensei* (roughly, 'Professor Patricia'). In this way, they ended up with something that satisfied the US norms of positive politeness (based on reciprocal first naming) and their own Japanese negative politeness norms based on respect and social distance (achieved through the use of titles). This was a very clever strategy, because the end product fulfilled the expectations both of the speakers and the addressee.

Sociolinguistic competence
The skills and resources speakers need to deploy in order to be competent members of a speech community using language, not only grammatically but appropriately in different contexts, *domains* or with different *interlocutors*. (See also *Grammatical competence; Pragmatic competence.*)

Connections with theory

We could say that these students found themselves in a situation that tests their **sociolinguistic competence**.

Dell Hymes proposed that formal linguistic systems (our **grammatical competence**) are part of different sociolinguistic systems. Our sociolinguistic competence allows us to select the appropriate utterance from all the possible grammatical utterances made available to us by our grammatical competence (1974: 75). That is, competence goes beyond simply knowing the rules for combining words into phrases and then phrases into clauses. In order to be a truly competent speaker of a language, you also have to know when to use certain styles or registers, what variants are generally (though subconsciously) recognised as being appropriate for different groups of speakers, appropriate politeness routines, and even when to speak or stay silent. Some of this kind of knowledge may also be described as **pragmatic competence** in the literature, but the important point here is that some linguists recognise forms of competence that go beyond syntax and semantics.

The Brown and Levinson framework has provided a fairly useful foundation for researchers who are interested in describing in detail the mechanics of intercultural communication and miscommunication (e.g., Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Blum-Kulka 1997). There are several reasons for this. For example, the framework provides a simple classification or typological system under which the norms of any group of speakers in any particular context can be defined as more or less oriented to positive or negative face wants. Once the differences between the norms of different groups of speakers have been identified, points of possible intervention and specific training can be proposed in order to avoid cross-cultural miscommunication.

Researchers such as Gabrielle Kasper have looked at a number of the kinds of FTAs that are central to Brown and Levinson's theory, and they have tried to determine how the sociolinguistic strategies most frequently associated with a particular FTA in the learner's first language compare with the sociolinguistic strategies used by native speakers of the learner's target language. If specific differences can be identified (e.g., one language tends to conventionally use negative politeness strategies while the other uses positive or negative politeness strategies), teaching can be focused on areas in which the different social and linguistic skills are most marked and are therefore most likely to be problematic.

Grammatical competence
See *Competence and performance.*

Pragmatic competence
The ability of a well-socialised speaker to know when certain speech acts are

Connections with theory

The method of comparing the linguistic strategies associated with FTAs in different languages is a form of **contrastive analysis**. The use of contrastive analysis has been widely used as the basis for devising second-language teaching materials that target areas of greatest difference – and it is assumed, greatest difficulty – between learners' first language and their target language.

required, appropriate or inappropriate. A competence required over and above *grammatical competence* in order to successfully participate as a member of a speech community. (See also *Sociolinguistic competence.*)

For instance, if you want to request a drink in a bar in English you usually use some strategies that attend to the addressee's (bartender's) negative face wants, e.g., *Could I have a glass of red wine, please?* However, in German there is less attention to the server's negative face wants, and it is perfectly appropriate to say something like, *Ich kriege einen Rotwein* ('I'll get red wine'), with no 'please' or 'could'. It is possible to add *bitte* ('please') and to say *könnte* ('could'), but if you used both the request would sound absurd and slightly snooty. In some cases, you can imagine that these sorts of differences can cause real social difficulties when learners try to transfer their native-language strategies into the language they are learning, so it is useful for researchers like Kasper to have a framework in which they can describe these differences and prescribe solutions for language teachers.

exercise

Translating politeness

Make a list of three possible contexts in which you might have to *refuse* an offer made to you. Try to vary the contexts as much as possible in terms of P, D and C. Present them as short scenarios like this:

A friend suggests you should skip your 4 o'clock lecture to come to the movies. You don't want to. You say: _____

(Be sure to allow them to say 'nothing', i.e., to avoid the FTA too.)

Ask a native speaker of English to complete the scenarios.

Now ask native speakers of other languages to imagine being in this situation. Ask them to complete the sentences first in their own language, and then to translate the response (try and make the translation as literal as possible).

What differences can you see, and how would you describe them in terms of the notions of attention to positive and negative face wants?

Contrastive analysis

An approach to second-language acquisition that focuses on points of similarity and difference in two varieties.

CRITIQUES OF POLITENESS THEORY

As we have seen, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can be quite a powerful and effective way of describing the ways in which people are perceived to 'be polite/impolite' to each other. We have also seen that it has been readily adopted by some researchers into intercultural communication, and we have seen how the insights from politeness theory have

sometimes been used to shed light on more practical and applied questions of language teaching.

The assumption is that where they differ, learners will have most difficulty.

There are also a number of criticisms of this framework (Watts 2003, Leech 2007) and see also the suggestions for further reading). I will present three critiques which have been alluded to in our discussion already: the interdependence of the three variables that form the foundation of Brown and Levinson's approach, the (Western) emphasis on individualism and free choice, and the tendency to mix positive and negative politeness.

The interdependence of power, distance and cost of the imposition

As we have seen, power in this framework is essentially a vertical measure – a relation of superiority and subordination – and distance is essentially horizontal – how well people know each other. We have already noted that this provides a tidy theoretical distinction but that representing power and distance as independent factors is misleading. In practice, power and distance are very often heavily dependent on each other. This can make it difficult, if not artificial, to try and keep them separate. Generally the people we know best – that is, the people where there is least social distance – are also roughly our equals, neither our superiors nor our subordinates. When there is a relatively big power differential between individuals, it is also likely that they will be less close to each other socially. So in many cases, if you know the relative distance between interactants, you can fairly reliably predict the relative power between them as well (and vice versa).

Moreover, social distance can be simultaneously measured in different ways. When there are multiple dimensions on which distance can be calculated it can be difficult to predict whether interactants will orient themselves to one dimension or another. For example, some students from Hawai'i were trying to organise and systematically describe the decisions they make about whether to use Standard American English or Pidgin (discussed fully in the next chapter). They felt that they were aware of two very important dimensions for evaluating social distance.

As we will see in Chapter 6, part of a speaker's sociolinguistic competence in Hawai'i is knowing when to use Pidgin and with whom. The students all agreed that power and social distance are relevant factors in determining whether they will use Standard American English or Pidgin with an interlocutor, but they also agreed that the first and most salient question was whether or not their addressee was *Local*, too (in Hawai'i, people talk about those born there as *Locals*).

Many of the students felt that *Localness* overrides any other constraints there might be on using a language. If their interlocutor was clearly Local, they reported that they would always start out using Pidgin, no matter how formal the context or how little they knew the other person. They reported that even if they were discussing formal matters to do with their enrolment at university or getting a driver's licence, their first concern would be with whether or not their addressee was Local or not. If the addressee was, they said they would start out using Pidgin, and then adjust as necessary, depending on other cues their addressee might give about the social distance or power differential in that setting.

In short, choosing to use Pidgin in Hawai'i is an important (essentially, positive) politeness strategy for upwardly mobile or middle-class people like these students. However, the decision to use one language rather than another turns out to involve a lot of complicated and sometimes quite rapid calculations about the social nature of an unfolding interaction. These

calculations are based on a rich history of other interactions that together shape an individual's sociolinguistic competence in Hawai'i. Even an apparently straightforward question about language choice requires speakers simultaneously to track power and distance in their relationships with other people along dimensions that are specific to Hawai'i (Localness) and that are shared with other Americans (previous acquaintance, institutional roles, etc.).

The emphasis on a speaker's choices

CHAPTER 6, RSR

A number of researchers on politeness have criticised the Brown and Levinson model for focusing too heavily on the speaker. Sachiko Ide, a Japanese sociolinguist, has suggested that this reflects Western values of individualism and does not fit well with societies like Japan where a person's identity is perceived to be bound up in their group membership, with all the collective rights and responsibilities associated with the group, rather than with the exercise of rational self-interest that is at the heart of Western theories of identity (Ide 1989).

Some work on intercultural communication has tried to group societies according to how **individualistic** or how **collectivist** they are. It might be appropriate to describe politeness primarily in terms of the concerns of the speaker and addressee as individuals in prototypically individualistic societies, such as Australia or the US. Setting a high value on autonomy and having choices are attributes that cluster together and help define individualistic societies. But in societies with collectivist values, such as Japan, Thailand and China, this misses key features organising the social order, including requirements for polite behaviour. In these societies, Ide argues that Japanese society (and other collectivist communities) values attention to people's interdependence and to reciprocal relationships (see also Ting-Toomey 1988). The importance of discerning social behaviour appropriate to the social situation is emphasised. The Japanese word for this discernment is ***wakimae***. Ide argues that *wakimae* is a much better basis for formulating models of politeness in Japan than the kind of individualistic decisions shown in Figure 5.1.

Individualistic

A society that emphasises and celebrates the individual over relationships (cf. *Collectivist*).

Collectivist

A collectivist society emphasises the relationships and interdependence of the individuals it is comprised of (cf. *individualistic*). (See also *Wakamae*.)

Wakimae

A Japanese term introduced to the study of *politeness* by Sachiko Ide. Refers to the attention paid to people's interdependence and to the reciprocity of relationships, and, specifically, the discernment of appropriate behaviour based on this.

It should be noted that the clusters of social attributes and the contrast between individualistic and collectivist cultures are derived from a study of one multinational corporation (Hofstede 1980). Hofstede presented his findings in terms of the national origin of the employees surveyed, but his research was neither intended nor designed to thoroughly probe the values and behavioural norms of the nations themselves. This means sociolinguists should be a little cautious (or self-critical) about incorporating the distinction between collectivist and individualistic cultures into their research. Moreover, work by Morales and his associates suggests that when these constructs are brought down to the level of individuals, the associations between politeness and collectivist/individualistic attitudes become very shaky. They found that classifying an individual as individualistic or collectivist did not allow them to make reliable predictions about what politeness strategies they would choose under different circumstances (Morales *et al.* 1998).

Mixed messages: showing attention to both positive and negative face

Relatedly, in some of the earlier examples we saw that attention to positive and negative face wants can be bundled into a single utterance, and we noted that it is not clear how such examples should be analysed. They certainly don't cancel each other out, but would we want

to categorise the utterance as an example of positive politeness, or negative politeness? The problem can be extended beyond the individual to the group: there are no groups of speakers who solely use positive or negative politeness strategies or that are wholly collectivist or individualistic. I have relied on national stereotypes in a number of illustrations of how politeness works, but by definition a stereotype simplifies and abstracts away from complexity and diversity. An American reader might justly object that the valorisation of individualism in the US should be offset against the strong sense of a community that is manifested in the large number of hyphenated group identities: Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Polish-Americans, etc. Likewise, a Japanese reader might object that Japanese society is just as well known for the celebration of highly idiosyncratic expressions of individual difference in personal fashion as it is for its emphasis on discernment.

One of the criticisms of Brown and Levinson's framework is that it very easily leads analysts towards overly simplistic categorisations, such as Thai society attends to deference and negative face, while Australian society attends to familiarity and positive face. Such generalisations are especially unwarranted if they depend on studies of only one or two FTAs (e.g., requests or orders).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Politeness strategies can in some ways also be construed as sociolinguistic variables. To the extent that they are used to negotiate a position for a speaker in relation to others in the complicated social space we live in, they perform similar functions to the alternations between languages or styles within a language that we have looked at, and even the alternation between sounds that can mark identity or differentiation from others. However, politeness strategies do differ from the kinds of sociolinguistic variables that we have looked at already in previous chapters. Those variables are realised by variants which stand in mutual opposition to each other, and are semantically equivalent (that is, they do not change the linguistic meaning of the utterance even if, as we have seen, their social meaning differs). Politeness strategies are not like this. In the exercises, you have seen many cases where different strategies nest and pile up on each other, reinforcing each other or adding nuances to the entire message. Politeness strategies generally do add some meaning to the utterance. In some cases it may not be great, but in other cases – say when the speaker establishes an obligation to perform some action at some time in the future – the politeness strategy clearly conveys some kind of proposition or idea.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is an attempt to formalise how our choice of phrases, or even single words, fits into the complexities of the social order. Like other work in sociolinguistics, it attempts to show how apparently diverse and heterogeneous linguistic routines are nonetheless constrained and systematic. We have seen that a number of criticisms can be levelled at it, but that the fundamental notion of *face* is one that most theorists agree lies at the heart of politeness. Leech's (2007) synthesis of Brown and Levinson's strengths and the strengths of the criticisms made by Asian sociolinguists and post-modern sociolinguists offers a somewhat simpler definition of what politeness is. By focusing the definition on both the speaker and the hearer, and by reframing politeness in terms of *value* (necessarily culture specific), he has tried to retain the elements of Brown and Levinson's approach that have had lasting appeal with the more cogent critiques.

In the next chapters we move away from the discussion of how interpersonal factors constrain speakers' choice of language. We will begin to look at how speakers use language

as a means for organising and giving meaning to larger social groupings. We have seen that politeness is about satisfying the needs of individual speakers and addressees, but also that it is about satisfying social or cultural norms. Similarly, in the next chapters it is worth bearing in mind that generalisations about the orderliness of talk between subgroups in a speech community are only possible because of the orderliness of individuals in those groups.

FURTHER READING

Watts (2003) – for a comprehensive summary of research on politeness.
Leech (1980, 2007) – another widely used framework for analysing politeness, with well-explained connections to pragmatic theory.
Holmes (1995, 2008) – on gender and politeness and on politeness in workplaces.
Mills (2003) – also on gender and politeness, but requires more engagement with theory.
Jaworski (1993) – more on silence.
Ting-Toomey (1994) – articles providing further perspectives on *face* and *facework*.

If you are interested in this topic, the *Journal of Politeness Research* will be useful.