

論文

## Politeness Strategies and Their Linguistic Markers.\*

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**Abstract:**

This essay will present an overview of politeness strategies and their linguistic markers, illustrating it with examples drawn from short texts.

**Keywords:**

Politeness Strategies, Redressive Action, Positive/Negative Politeness, Face-Threatening-Acts, Hedges

## 1. Introduction

Research in the pragmatics of politeness aims at explaining contextual and cultural variability in linguistic actions, i.e., what social motivations are inherent in the choice of verbal strategies, and what social meanings are attached to that choice (that is “*politeness strategies*”) for the accomplishments of communicative goals (cited in Hendriks, 2009, p. 1).

One of the approaches counted when studying language in use is pragmatics and one of its subcategories includes politeness theory. Politeness theory deals with the concept of face, with acts which are potentially damaging to face, and with the linguistic stratagems used for limiting such damage, when it is unavoidable. It is informed not only by linguistic pragmatics, but also by social psychology and linguistic anthropology (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kasper, 1997, cited in Trappes-Lomax, 2004, p. 137).

## 2. Definition of politeness

Thomas (1995, p. 149) points out that there has been a great deal of interest in politeness in pragmatics studies, and just as definitions of pragmatics vary, so too do definitions of politeness. The term is not only used in different ways, but also the term itself is not defined. Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992, p. 3) maintain as follows:

… one of the oddest things about politeness research is that the term “politeness” itself is either not explicitly defined at all or else taken to be a consequence of rational social goals such as maximising the benefit to self and other, minimising the face-threatening nature of a social act, displaying adequate proficiency in the accepted standards of social etiquette, avoiding conflict, making sure that the social interaction runs smoothly, etc.

Another difficulty is pointed out by Kasper (1994, p. 3206), noting the different meanings of the term in ordinary jargon and pragmatics. In the former, he asserts that:

... ‘politeness’ refers to proper social conduct and tactful consideration for others.

while in the latter,

... ‘politeness’ as a technical term in linguistic pragmatics refers to a broader, substantially more democratic concept. Since the object of pragmatic inquiry is linguistic action, ‘politeness’ as a pragmatic notion refers to ways in which linguistic action is carried out – more specifically, ways in which the relational function in linguistic action is expressed.

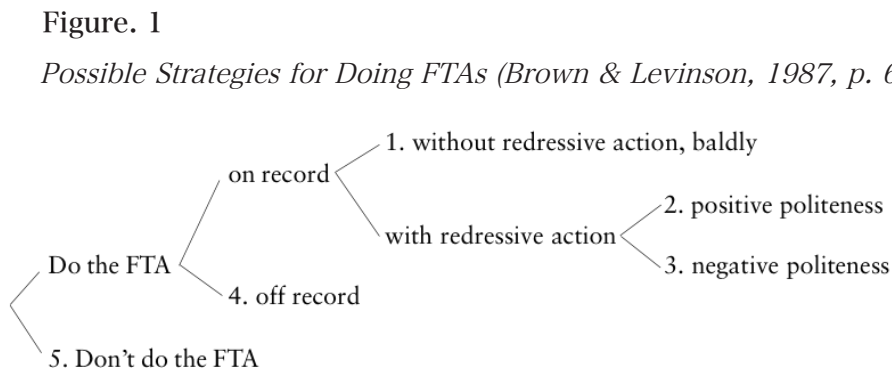
In her study of politeness in the context of cross-cultural pragmatics between British English and Japanese, Fukushima (2003) takes politeness to refer to “the use of communication strategies intended to maintain mutual face and to achieve smooth communication, taking into account human relationships” (p. 27). She further mentions that the promotion and maintenance of politeness calls for displays of appropriate behaviour. What is considered to be appropriate varies from situation to situation and culture to culture, while personal values and tastes may also influence judgements of appropriateness (*ibid.*).

The most cited definition, but having been controversial and criticised their claims to universality (e.g., Ide, 1989), is that of Brown and Levinson’s (1987), which states that politeness is the intentional, strategic behaviour of an individual meant to satisfy self and other face wants in case of threats, ratified via positive and negative styles of redress. ‘Face’ is divided into two dimensions: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to an

individual's desire to be accepted and valued by others, and negative face pertains to one's want to have the freedom to act without being impeded (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 13). Their key concept regarding face is Face-Threatening-Acts (FTAs), which means that "certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" (p. 65). The next section will deal with strategies, so-called politeness strategies, to either avoid or mitigate such face-threatening activities.

### 3. Overview of politeness strategies and their linguistic markers

Strategies for doing FTAs in interaction are illustrated by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 69) as shown in the figure below:



As shown above, there are five politeness strategies: (1) on record; (2) positive politeness; (3) negative politeness; (4) off record; and (5) "Don't do the FTAs" strategies.

On record strategy has two subcategories, one without redressive action, baldly, and the other one with redressive action.

Doing an act baldly, without redress, involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible (for example, for a request, saying 'Do X!') (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69). Hence, requests

without redress can include direct requests such as (Fukushima, 2003, p. 68):

- a. *Come in.* (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69)
- b. *Give me an aspirin, please.* (Sifianou, 1995, p. 244)
- c. *Open the valve now!* (Hendriks, 2009, p. 2)

Bald-on-record strategies are used when: (a) there is a demand for speaking with maximum efficiency (e.g., in emergencies); (b) the overall ‘weightiness’ of the FTA is very small (e.g., when making a trivial request of someone you know well and who has no power over you); (c) the FTA is perceived as being in the H’s (hearer) interest; (d) the power differential is great (the powerful participant will often employ no indirectness at all); and (e) the speaker has deliberately chosen to be maximally offensive (Thomas, 1995, pp. 170-171).

Redressive action “attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way, or with such modifications or additions, that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended or desired, and that S (speaker) in general recognises H’s (hearer) face wants and himself wants them to be achieved” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp. 69-70). As shown in the figure above, redressive action has two subcategories: positive politeness and negative politeness. By redressive action Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 69-70) mean action that “gives face” to the addressee, showing that face threat is not intended. Such redressive action takes one of the two forms, negative politeness or positive politeness, depending on which aspect of face (negative or positive) is being attended to.

Positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of H, the positive self-image that he claims for himself (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). Positive politeness strategies are available to enhance the positive face wants/needs of the interlocutor. To do so, the speaker may attend to the

hearer by stressing reciprocity, displaying optimism or a common point of view. Or he may try and create a feeling of solidarity with the interlocutor (Hendriks, 2009, p. 2). Examples of positive politeness indicating a social connection between the speaker and listener are shown below:

a. *Let's close the window.* (Burke & Kraut, 2008, p. 281)

b. An example of compliment from Homles (2003, p. 177)

Chris: Hi, Pat. Sorry, I'm late. The boss wanted to set up a time for a meeting just as I was leaving.

Pat: That's OK, Chris. *You're looking good. Is it a new suit?* (italicised by the author)

Chris: Mm. It's nice, isn't it. I got it in Auckland last month. Have you had a break since I last saw you?

Pat: No, work work work I'm afraid. Never mind. Have you got a copy of the report with you?

c. *Uncle Jim enquires about your health and would like to know if he can borrow your hammer.* (Hendriks, 2009, p. 2)

Specific positive politeness strategies are shown by Burke & Kraut (2008, p. 282):

Positive politeness strategies:

P1. Notice, attend to the hearer's needs

P2. Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy

P3. Intensify interest to the hearer

P4. Use in-group identity markers

P5. Seek agreement

P6. Avoid disagreement

P7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground

P8. Joke

- P9. Assert/presuppose knowledge of hearer's concerns
- P10. Offer, promise
- P11. Be optimistic
- P12. Include both speaker and hearer in activity
- P13. Give or ask for reason
- P14. Assume or assert reciprocity
- P15. Give gifts to the hearer

Negative politeness, on the other hand, is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying (redressing) H's negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70). In negative politeness, there is a tension between (a) the desire to go on record as a prerequisite to being seen to pay face, and (b) the desire to go off record to avoid imposing (Fukushima, 2003, p. 69). A compromise is reached in conventionalised indirectness, because whatever the indirect mechanism used to do an FTA, once it is fully conventionalised as a way of doing that FTA, it is no longer off record (*ibid.*). Clark (1979) shows examples of conventionally indirect requests as follows:

- a. Can you reach the salt?
- b. Are you able to reach the salt?

In these requests, the speaker asks the hearer indirectly to do a particular act by questioning hearer's ability to do that act. More indirect questions are provided by Searle (1975, pp. 65-66):

- 1. Sentences concerning H's ability to perform A  
*e.g., Can you reach the salt?*

2. Sentences concerning S's wish or want that H will do A

*e.g., I would like you to go now.*

3. Sentences concerning H's doing A

*e.g., Officers will henceforth wear ties at dinner.*

*Will you quit making that awful racket?*

4. Sentences concerning H's desire or willingness to do A

*e.g., Would you be willing to write a letter of recommendation for me?*

5. Sentences concerning reasons for doing A

*e.g., You ought to be more polite to your mother.*

This class also contains many examples that have no generality of form but obviously, in an appropriate context, would be uttered as indirect requests.

*e.g., You're standing on my foot.*

*I can't see the movie screen while you have that hat on.*

6. Sentences embedding one of these elements inside another; also, sentences embedding an explicit directive illocutionary verb inside one of these contexts

*e.g., Would you mind awfully if I asked you if you could write me a letter of recommendation?*

Hendriks (2009, p. 2) shows 'hedges' as other conventional linguistic means used as a negative politeness strategy. A hedge is a particle, a word or phrase which modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial, or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected (*ibid.*). She shows examples of hedges as follows:



## a. Quality hedges

*There is some evidence to the effect that*

*I think, I believe, assume*

*As I remember it*

*You might say*

*As I recall*

## b. Relevance hedges

*This may not be relevant but*

*I might mention at this point*

*Sorry, I've just thought*

*Yes, since you ask*

Specific negative politeness strategies are shown by Burke & Kraut (2008, p. 282):

Negative politeness strategies:

N1. Be conventionally indirect

N2. Question, hedge

N3. Be pessimistic

N4. Minimise the imposition

N5. Give deference

N6. Apologise

N7. Impersonalise the speaker and hearer

N8. State the face threatening action as a general rule

N9. Nominalise

N10. Go on record as incurring a debt

As these examples show, positive politeness is “approach-based” and negative politeness is “avoidance-based” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70).

Brown and Levinson's forth politeness strategy is "off record," by which they mean that a communicative act is produced "in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 211). If a speaker wants to do an FTA, but wants to avoid the responsibility for doing it, s/he can do it off record and leave it up to the addressee to decide how to interpret the utterance (Fukushima, 2003, p. 69). A good example is given by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 215) below:

S: It's a bit chilly here. (c.i., Shut the window.)

H: Yes, it is. (Or:) Yes, it is, why don't you put your sweater back on?  
(Hendriks, 2009, p. 3)

Sifianou (1995, p. 244) also indicates an example of off-record strategy:

a. I've got a splitting headache.

The speaker of the utterance made a statement providing a piece of information which, nevertheless, is intended as a request. This statement could have more than one interpretation, depending on the inference by the hearer, namely, it can be interpreted as just a statement, or as a request (Fukushima, 2003, pp. 69-70). Blum-Kulka (1989, p. 42) explains the difference between conventional and non-conventional indirectness:

For conventional indirectness, conventions of propositional content (means) and linguistic form combine to signal requestive force. Nonconventional indirectness, on the other hand, is in principle open-ended, both in terms of propositional content and linguistic form as well as pragmatic force.

As indicated by the examples shown above, nonconventional indirectness is associated mainly with ambiguity at the speaker's meaning level, displays a multiplicity of meanings and tends to be nonspecific (*ibid.*).

Brown and Levinson's fifth politeness strategy is "Don't do the FTA." In this strategy, nothing is uttered because the risk of face loss is extremely great (Fukushima, 2003, p. 41).

#### 4. Conclusion

Communication is conducted every day seemingly as if there were no confusions, however, it is realised by communicators' making use of the strategies at least shown in this paper. They select the best strategy in a specific context, if at all, unconsciously or by judging from their experiences, taking into account the following variables (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 74):

- 1) social distance (D) between the speaker and hearer, in effect their degree of familiarity
- 2) the relative power (P) of the speaker and hearer
- 3) the absolute ranking (R) of the various impositions in the given culture

They claim that all three dimensions P, D, and R contribute to the seriousness of an FTA, and thus to a determination of the level of politeness with which, other things being equal, an FTA will be communicated (*ibid.*). Even though knowing these strategies does not always help facilitate an interaction (Hendriks, 2009, p. 7), it may be important to take them into account when learning a foreign language whose culture does not share the same conventionality. Ide (1989) states that Japanese often act according to the principle of conventionality, attributing Brown and Levinson's principle of rationality to the individualist Western tradition, which is incompatible with the Japanese collectivistic value system.

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