LINGUISTIC POLITENESS – A MAJOR TOOL FOR CROSS CULTURAL REQUESTS

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Abstract

In an era of growing internationalization, requesting—a demand made by a requester asking a favor of another person (Nelson et al 2002) -- has played a vital role in cross-cultural interactions. Since making requests involves the speaker's effort to get assistance from the hearer, it is intrinsically face-threatening (Brown and Levinson 1987). The use of politeness strategies then comes into play to soften the face threats. Moreover, since the notion of politeness is perceived differently across cultures (Blum-Kulka 1987), politeness strategies become helpful only when formulated in a socially and culturally appropriate way. This article explores linguistic politeness in requests based on politeness theories, linguistic politeness across cultures, shortcomings of universal politeness theories, studies of culture-specific politeness, and teaching linguistic politeness to EFL requesters.

Keywords: linguistic politeness, politeness theory, politeness strategies, cross-cultural requests

Introduction

People like other beings in this world, can't live without communication, and therefore employ various speech acts to communicate (Austin 1962). These speech acts are meaningful utterances that are rule-governed (Searle 1969). One of these speech acts is requesting or '*a demand made by a requester asking a favor of another person*' (Nelson et al 2002). People make requests for a number of reasons, either for information or actions in their daily lives (Sifianou 1992).

Unsurprisingly, requesting is considered an unavoidable social act in human communication and has become one of the most investigated speech acts in both theoretical and empirical studies on politeness (Prodanovic

2014), and in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics (Abdolrezapour 2012; Abdolrezapour and Eslami-Rasekh 2012; Achiba 2003; Lee 2011; Rose 2000, 2009). According to Brasdefer (2005), a request initiates the negotiation of face during a conversational interaction in which the speaker (requester) demands the hearer (requestee) perform an act that is beneficial to the requester but costly to the requestee.

Requests are imposing and face-threatening. As a result, they usually involve the use of politeness strategies to protect the face of the hearer and thus to increase the degree of success when making a request (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987). Since politeness, which plays a vital role in requests, is differently perceived cross-culturally (Yu 2002), it has become a universal concern across cultures and professions (O' Sullaivan 2007).

Attempting to explore linguistic politeness as a major tool for cross-cultural requests, this article starts with an overview of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, followed by a review of linguistic politeness in requests across cultures, shortcomings of universal politeness theories, studies of culture-specific politeness, and teaching linguistic politeness to learners of foreign languages.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Expanding from the concept of face or public image offered by Goffman's (1967), Brown and Levinson proposed an original face-saving model of politeness in 1978, and a revised model in 1987 known as Politeness Theory.

Brown and Levinson (1987) asserted that every individual possesses the two basic face desires: positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to the want to be approved of by others, while Negative face refers to the want to have their actions and thoughts unimpeded by others. Politeness Theory was constructed on the premise that many speech acts, especially in negotiated interactions, are intrinsically threatening to these notions of face. Face is a powerful constraint in requests because it is "*something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction*" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 66). Moreover, although the notion of face is believed to exist universally in human culture, in any particular society "face" is the subject of much cultural elaboration (p.13).

Face-threatening Acts (FTA's)

According to Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987, public self-image or face-desires of individuals are usually expected to be respected, so that any communicative behaviors that endanger the face desires of the addressee or the speaker are considered face threatening acts. This concept of 'face' is tied to politeness theory because politeness is the expressions of the speakers/writers aiming to "*mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another*" (Mills 2003, p. 6). Based on Politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed four linguistic politeness strategies to save the hearer's "face" when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired. Ordered from the most to the least threatening, these strategies include bald-on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record.

Linguistic Politeness Strategies

Bald-on Record Strategy is used when the speaker does not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. They say directly what they want or exactly what they mean without trying to save face of the interlocutor. This strategy is mostly used in situations in which they have a close relationship with each other. For instance, "Shut the door." (Holtgraves and Yang 1990).

Positive Politeness Strategy is used when the speaker attempts to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face by finding an agreement or giving compliments to the listener so that he/she feels good about himself/herself. This strategy is mostly used in situations where they both know each other fairly well. The friendliness in the relationship and the desire to be respected is recognized. For instance, "How about shutting the door for us?" (Holtgraves and Yang 1990).

Negative Politeness Strategy is used when the speaker wants to protect the hearer's negative face by performing indirect acts to minimize the imposition of the request on the hearer. This strategy is similar to Positive Politeness in that it is mostly used in situations where the speaker recognizes the friendliness and the desire to be respected by the hearer. However, the speaker assumes that he/she is in some way imposing on the other, for instance, "Could you shut the door?" (Holtgraves and Yang 1990).

Off-record Strategy, the most ambiguous tactic, is used when the speaker is trying not to directly impose on the hearer by using indirect language to transfer the decision making to the hearer. This indirect strategy

removes the speaker from being imposing. For instance, "It seems cold in here." (Holtgraves and Yang 1990).

Linguistic Politeness in Requests across Cultures

The notion of politeness is viewed in two different ways: universal and culture-specific. Brown and Levinson (1987) assume a correlation between indirectness and politeness by distinguishing between levels of directness in performing a face-threatening act. In other words, they equate indirectness with politeness and view levels of directness as universal (Ogiermann 2009). Clarity and politeness are considered complimentary elements in universal politeness theories (e.g. Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Fraser 1990). Indirectness in requests is motivated by politeness (Searl 1975).

Shortcomings of the Universal Politeness Theories

It has been noted that these universal politeness theories cannot answer several questions relevant to politeness in other cultures. One of the two main critical issues concerns the universality of the politeness theory. It was found that since the theory was based on only three languages: English, Tamil, and Tzeltal, the politeness theory was not universal but Anglo-centric (Wierzbicka 1985a, 1985b, 1990, 1991; Vilkki 2006).

In 1980s many of the Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) studies were done to analyze requests and apologies; speech acts most studied in research of linguistic politeness, across languages and cultures (AlFattah 2010; Najeeb et al 2012). The project aimed to investigate the relationship between degree of indirectness and degree of politeness or to see if there existed universal pragmatic principles in speech act realization and its universal specifications. Many studies supported the view that politeness is differently perceived cross- culturally (Yu 2011) and that what is viewed as polite in one culture may not be viewed as the same degree of politeness in another culture (Al-Marrani and Sazalie (2010). These findings exposed the other main critical issue--that non-conventional indirectness in requests does not necessarily imply politeness (Yu 2011). Rather, it can convey something else. For example, Blum-Kulka (1987: 133) found that indirect requests increase "*the interpretive demand of the hearer.*" Also they can "make the speaker sound devious and manipulative" (Pinker 2007: 442), or at worst a high degree of indirectness can be regarded as a waste of the hearer's time (Zemskaja 1997 as cited in Ogiermann 2009). On the contrary, direct requests, for example, can be the speakers' expressions of

intimacy, warmth, friendliness (Suh 1999; Watts 2003), solidarity, familiarity, closeness (Fukushima 2000), harmony in society (Gu 1990), social relationship (Matsumoto 1988), or even of lower English proficiency (Tanaka and Kawade 1982; Suh 1999; Rose 2000)

Studies of Culture-Specific Politeness

Culture-specific preferences in requests have been revealed by much research in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. These studies prove that there is no significant relation between indirectness and politeness and confirm that culturally-sensitive variables interfere with face-threatening acts. Below are examples of empirical research supporting culture-specific politeness.

Tanaka and Kawade (1982) investigated if politeness strategies used by Japanese ESL learners in requests were similar to those of native speakers of English. It was found that social status and psychological variables affect the use of politeness strategies in requests.

Wierzbicka (1985) investigated differences in requesting strategies in English and Polish based on the differences in their cultural norms. It was found that English native speakers used interrogatives to a great extent while avoiding the use of bare imperatives. In contrast, Polish rarely used interrogatives to convey requests. Lacking awareness of Polish culture that the use of interrogatives is largely associated with hostility and alienation, one might consider the Polish less polite or more impolite than English native speakers.

Blum-Kulka and House (1989) studied politeness in requests made by native speakers of Hebrew, Canadian French, Argentinean Spanish, Australian English, and German. Distinctive cross-cultural differences were found. The most direct speakers were Argentinean Spanish, followed by Hebrew. Moderately direct speakers were French Canadian and German, and Australian English speakers were the least direct and tended to have opted for highly scripted, routinized requestive strategies. The findings *"reliably reflect a general Spanish trend for higher levels of directness than those acceptable in the English speaking world"* (Blum-Kulka and House 1989: 139).

Fukushima (2000) investigated politeness strategies in requests made by British English and Japanese. It was found that choices of politeness strategy of the two cultures were influenced by perceptions of power, social distance and the weight of the imposition.

Felix-Brasdefer (2005) examined the notions of indirectness and politeness in a speech act of request among Mexican university students. The findings show that native Mexican Spanish speakers prefer to use conventional indirectness strategies in situations that display power and or distance, while preferring to use directness strategies when there is a close relationship between interlocutors. This shows that direct requests are situation-dependent and that directness expresses closeness and affiliation, rather than impoliteness.

Marti (2006) identified the realization and politeness perception of requests made by Turkish speakers and Turkish-German speakers. It was found that there was no linear relation between indirectness and politeness and that Turkish speakers prefer to use direct strategies whereas Turkish-German speakers prefer indirect strategies.

Chen and Eileen Chen (2007) explored the use of request strategies and the effect of social variables on Taiwanese EFL learners and American native speakers. It was found that both groups preferred conventionally indirect strategies and the degree of indirectness was influenced by social status—the choice of strategy tends to move towards directness when the speaker's social status is higher than the addressee's.

Jalilifar (2009) investigated request strategies used by EFL Iranian learners and Australian native speakers of English. It was found that the learners who have higher proficiency in English use indirect strategies more than other strategies, whereas Australian native speakers of English balance between these strategies.

Lin (2009) compared the use of query preparatory modals in conventionally indirect requests made by native speakers of English, native speakers of Chinese, and EFL Chinese learners. The findings show that the preference orders and distributions of the sub-strategies vary cross-culturally.

Since it is well accepted that linguistic politeness has an important role to play in any face-threatening act, and that the literature overall shows that these acts can be interfered with cross-culturally, sufficient awareness of other people's social concepts of politeness and politeness strategies that differ from culture to culture become a key factor toward the success of international requesting. Consequently, in the field of education, raising awareness of cross-cultural concepts of politeness and politeness strategies is needed for learners of second or foreign languages.

Teaching Linguistic Politeness to EFL Requesters

Requesting is an unavoidable key speech act in daily communication and is seen to be easily affected by cultural variables. The notions of politeness and the degree of politeness also differ cross-culturally and thus the different perceptions on politeness may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in international communication (eg. Blum-Kulka 1987; Marti 2006; Pinker 2007; Yu 2011). In terms of second or foreign language teaching, an individual's linguistic competence consists of grammatical competence and pragmatic competence, or "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas 1983: 92). Consequently, teaching linguistic politeness, a pragmatic perspective, should be central to foreign language teaching, with the aim that learners can pursue the target language in a culturally appropriate way. Even though there has been little work done on the explicit teaching of sociopragmatic knowledge (Bou-Franch, 2001; Garcés-Conejos, 2001; Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos, 2003), the following pedagogies have been introduced for teaching linguistic politeness in speech acts.

Consciousness-raising Activity

Meier (1997), viewing politeness as a situation-bound notion, proposed to imply 1) *"an understanding that different evaluations of appropriateness may exist across cultures"* (Meier 1997: 24) and 2) *"paying attention to contextual factors and their value in the L2 so that learners will be prepared to make informed choices in interaction and present their desired image"* (Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos, 2003: 10). Meier's three groups of activities addressing causes of pragmatic failure and negative transfer include:

1. Discussion of judgements of appropriateness in context in both cultures
2. Use of learner observation, discussions and comparison of unsuccessful/successful dialogues
3. Modification of textbook dialogues and participation in role plays

Genre-based Approach

Teaching linguistic politeness can be based on genre considerations—Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics (e.g., Martin 1985) and English for Specific Purposes (e.g., Bhatia 1993; Swales 1990). Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics views genre as *"a staged activity that serves important social goals"* (Gomez-Moron 1998: 7 as cited in Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos, 2003). This means that a principled way will be offered to students so that they can identify and focus on different types of English texts and they will also be provided with *"a sense of the generic models that are regularly revisited in an English-speaking culture"* (Christie 1999: 762). In contrast, English for Specific Purposes, claiming that genre is a powerful teaching tool for non-native speakers, views it as an appropriate tool to analyze spoken and written language use in a professional and academic settings (Gomez-Moron 1998). In short, these two approaches share the belief that a descriptive genre-sensitive framework or structured communicative events with provided organized social processes, will help students acquire pragmatic knowledge.

Politeness Systems-based Approach

Scollon and Scollon (1995) proposed teaching linguistic politeness based on the notion of politeness systems. Three politeness systems are a deference politeness system (-P, + D), a solidarity politeness system (-P, -D), and a hierarchical politeness system (+P). This is a more restricted framework for the understanding and assessment of the sociological variables such as power, distance, and ranking of imposition, and for the choice of the appropriate or expected set of strategies students should select to codify their social interactions.

- Deference Politeness System (-P, + D) refers to the politeness system of no power participants recognizing themselves as equals.
- Solidarity Politeness System (-P, -D) refers to the politeness system of participants recognizing themselves as equals and with closeness and familiarity.
- Hierarchical Politeness System (+P) refers to the politeness system of participants recognizing and respecting social differences.

Awareness-Raising Task

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos (2003) proposed an awareness-raising task based on the teaching of pragmatic knowledge as a starting point and later combined with indirect practice of special skills and strategies. This task consists of five methodological steps for students to follow.

1. Defining linguistic politeness.

2. Being introduced to Brown and Levinson's (1987) descriptive account of the lexico-syntactic and prosodic realization of linguistic politeness

3. Being introduced to Scollon and Scollon's (1995) politeness systems as a compliment to the analysis of the sociological variables identified by Brown and Levinson.

4. Analyzing a variety of target-language short excerpts of texts belonging to different genres: from ordinary conversation to academic writing (Bou-Franch 2001)

5. Reflecting on the notion of positive-politeness oriented cultures and negative politeness oriented cultures--that different cultures may favour different politeness strategies and levels for the same situations.

After a direct approach to teach pragmatic knowledge in each step, students should be encouraged to use specific skills and strategies to analyze and discuss the texts in communicative activities.

Conclusion

The impact of politeness in requests has been of interest to various social science researchers and teachers of second or foreign languages. Due to the state of the art of "linguistic politeness", the notion of politeness is perceived in two different ways: universal (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987) and culture-specific (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1987). These different perceptions lead to different ways to tackle the impact of politeness in requests. Despite some shortcomings in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, it cannot be argued that their theory can effectively guide individuals in ways to improve their speech and actions (Goldsmith 2006). Culture-specific politeness, in contrast, yields practical implications especially for teaching cross-cultural linguistic politeness. For a teacher of a foreign language, awareness of both views should be raised among students within communicative interactions. A direct approach to teaching politeness, a pragmatic knowledge, followed by

the indirect teaching of specific skills and strategies in communicative interactions is recommended (Bou-Franch and Garces-Conejos 2003). According to Kasper (1997), it is firmly believed that *"without some form of instruction, many aspects of pragmatic competence do not develop sufficiently."*

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