Politeness

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Language is not just a means to pass factual content from one person to another, it is also a tool to shape relationships and thus to negotiate interpersonal meaning. When we use language, we therefore also reveal something about ourselves and our relationships with others. For example, when requesting, asking, or apologizing, people adapt their language use depending on the nature of their relationship with their addressee (e.g., father–child; employer–employee; friends) and the matter or topic in question. The choice of terms of address is another typical example to show the relational aspect of language. Not only will one and the same person be addressed differently throughout the day (as wife, mother, professional, etc.), she will reciprocate depending on factors such as power, affect, distance or closeness, the roles of the interactants, and the norms of appropriate conduct in the particular context. For decades, linguistic research has been interested in this relational aspect of language, the factors which influence it, and the ways people shape and exploit the social norms that guide their social practices. The term "politeness" is closely linked to this research field and the notion has now been a popular topic in linguistics for over 30 years (for overviews see Suggested Readings). However, it defies easy definition both as a subject in research and as a lay term in a particular culture. In what follows, a selection of early approaches to politeness phenomena will be introduced. Then more recent developments in the field will be mentioned with respect to methodological and theoretical issues and the scope of language data investigated.

Several researchers in the 1970s and 1980s argued that "politeness" was a particular driving force in how people determine language choice and negotiate relational meaning. We can count the approaches by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), and Leech (1983) among the early and influential contributions to the study of politeness. Working within a framework of pragmatics in the broad sense—the study of language in use—these researchers argued that there are not only syntactic rules in establishing grammaticality of sentences but also pragmatic rules that determine the appropriateness of language use. They thereby all endeavored to complement the cooperative principle (CP; Grice, 1975). In brief, the CP postulates that

interactants, in their process of interpretation, work on the assumption that people adhere to four maxims: the maxims of quantity (be informative), quality (no falsehoods; no utterances that lack evidence), relation (be relevant), and manner (avoid obscurity or ambiguity, be brief and orderly; Grice, 1975, pp. 45–6). If interlocutors do not follow these maxims in the production of an utterance (and they frequently do not), their non-adherence results in additional meaning when the interpreter tries to work out why it took place. Politeness is then argued to be a motivation for nonadherence (Leech, 1983, p. 80). For example, people may speak in a less direct way (nonadherence to the maxim of manner) because politeness considerations overrule the Gricean maxims. Lakoff (1973, p. 298) proposes "rules of politeness" that affect language in use: (a) "Don't impose," (b) "Give options," and (c) "Make [alter] feel good—be friendly." She thus highlights that speakers orient toward their addressees and take their point of view into account. The rules as such express certain values attached to cultural norms, as it is considered negative to impose on others (first rule), to leave people without any choice (second rule), or to make them feel uncomfortable (third rule). Depending on the cultures, different rules will gain precedence (Lakoff, 1973, p. 303). In a similar vein, Leech (1983) introduces the so-called "politeness principle," which consists of six politeness maxims: the tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy maxims. When confronted with having to work out an implicature caused by the non-adherence to one of the maxims of the cooperative principle, the addressees will then look for the motivation in one of the politeness maxims. For example, when a person answers "The children were in your room this morning" to the question "Where's my box of chocolates" (Leech, 1983, p. 94), we can argue that the motivation to answer in this indirect manner lies with the wish to be tactful in not directly accusing the children of having taken the chocolates. In fact, Leech (1983, p. 108) associates indirectness with politeness by saying that "indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be."

This link between indirectness and politeness is also notable in the most influential work on politeness by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987). They gave currency to the notions of "face" and "face-threatening act" in the research community. Face, originally taken from Goffman (1955), is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself [*sic*]" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61), and it is split into a positive (involvement) and negative (distance) aspect. Negative face is thus "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others," while positive face is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62). Interlocutors are argued to be rational agents who take their own and the addressees' face wants into account when producing language. However, the need to serve the two sides of face and the face interests of both speaker and addressee can be in conflict with each other. Face-threatening acts (FTAs) are "acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 65). When committing an FTA "x" is unavoidable, speakers will assess the risk of face loss, in other words the "weightiness" of the FTA (W_x), by taking power (P) and distance (D) factors between the interlocutors (S,H) into account, as well as the relative ranking of the imposition (R_x) of the specific FTA "x" in a cultural context (Brown & Levinson,

1987, p. 76). This results in the following equation: $W_x = D (S,H) + P (H,S) + R_x$. Depending on how strong the estimation of risk of face loss is, the speakers will determine linguistic strategies of mitigation or non-mitigation: (a) "Do the FTA on record," "without redressive action"; (b) do the FTA "with redressive action" attending to positive face needs; (c) do the FTA "with redressive action" attending to negative face needs; (d) do the FTA "off record," in other words the strategy is so indirect that the speaker can claim not to have intended the force of the utterance; or (e) choose not to do the FTA at all (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 60). In the case of strategy (a) the risk of face loss is estimated to be least strong; in the case of strategy (e) it is the strongest. Ultimately, Brown and Levinson equate politeness with the display of face consideration in the form of mitigation.

Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory can easily be called the most influential contribution to this field of research. All the subsequent studies contributed to the plethora of publications on politeness either by reproducing their study design (e.g., in an attempt to establish cultural differences with respect to the orientation to positive or negative face needs), or by criticizing and challenging their work. The debates have raised several important issues; only two will be mentioned here. First, despite the fact that Brown and Levinson aimed at a universal framework derived from the study of Tamil, English, and Tzeltal, it was exactly this claim for universality that was challenged with respect to their key notion of "face." Especially researchers on Asian languages and cultures argued early on that the notion of face captured predominantly Western values (involvement and distance) and was not applicable to their cultures to the same extent. This criticism has resulted in a very active research tradition on politeness in Asian languages, and especially on forms of respect and deference in the form of honorifics (for overviews, see Haugh, 2010; Okamoto, 2010). The notion of face is still being debated in the research community at large. Second, the ranking of strategies according to risk of face loss has been challenged as well. Often attention to positive and negative face may co-occur in the same utterance, or the more indirect rendition of an FTA is not necessarily the more polite version. As Lakoff (1973, p. 303) has already pointed out, "what is polite for me may be rude for you." Members of a particular discursive practice might therefore object to an indirect form of a request, for instance, since their usual rules of conduct would deem indirectness to be inappropriate. Yet, despite such criticism of Brown and Levinson's work, their detailed description of linguistic strategies for interpersonal effect is unprecedented and explains its usefulness to this day.

The 1990s and early 2000s especially saw a rise in critical reassessments of the early work of politeness researchers, which resulted in two main trends: (a) discussing methodological and theoretical issues, and (b) broadening the scope of data and interest. Both trends will be briefly introduced here.

One of the questions discussed with respect to theory and methodology is concerned with whether one should take an etic (first-order) or an emic (second-order) approach to the study of politeness (see Eelen, 2001; Locher & Bousfield, 2008). Brown and Levinson's work represents a classic second-order approach in that they use the term "politeness" as a technical term to describe face-threat mitigation (irrespective of the addressee's assessment of the utterance). This approach was replicated in the early works on impoliteness, which mirrored the Brown and

Levinson politeness strategies and their ranking (Lachenicht, 1980; Culpeper, 1996; Kienpointner, 1997). More recently, researchers such as Bousfield and Culpeper (2008), or Terkourafi (2005), while still firmly arguing for the benefits of a second-order approach to studying politeness and impoliteness phenomena, also develop Brown and Levinson's or their own frameworks further. Bousfield (2010), for example, argues for the use of technical terms, which are, however, informed by lay people's understandings of these very concepts. Ultimately, he is aiming for a predictive theory of politeness and impoliteness. In the same vein, Terkourafi (2005) explores a frame-based approach to politeness phenomena in that she investigates practices that come with expectations about appropriate behavior. She argues that a quantitative approach will help in capturing politeness phenomena and will allow for a certain level of prediction.

Researchers calling for a first-order approach (e.g., Mills, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005) argue that the term "politeness" refers to a judgment of facework or relational work with respect to norms of conduct in a given context made by a member of a community of practice (see also the work by Watts, 1989, and Fraser, 1990, who pointed early on to the importance of judgments). This means that different groups of people may have different opinions about what counts as "polite." The recognition of a certain variability of judgments of "polite" expression, as mentioned by Lakoff above, is thus at the core of the first-order approach to politeness phenomena, combined with the aim to understand better how interlocutors negotiate the relational aspect of language use in general.

In addition, the term "politeness" is only one of many possible labels in English to describe "relational work," where the latter "refers to all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice" (Locher & Watts, 2008, p. 96). Other English labels for face-maintaining and face-enhancing relational work might be 'refined,' or 'polished,' while face-aggravating behavior might be referred to as 'impolite,' 'rude,' 'uncouth,' and so on. (Note that in this description "face-maintaining," etc., is used as a technical concept, while the lexemes in single quotes are emic terms.)

A further point for consideration is that terms such as "politeness," "impoliteness," or "rudeness" are hard to translate into other languages, precisely because they index cultural values. For this reason, it is also problematic to raise a first-order evaluative lexeme of a particular language to a second-order (some would argue "universal") theoretical concept. However, what seems to be a human (universal) trait is the fact that people negotiate relationships by means of appropriate language use, while the labels they give such behavior and the norms that govern the behavior are variable.

When considering "politeness" as an evaluative concept embedded in a particular cultural context, it is self-evident that the term as such holds no entirely stable meaning. "Politeness," just like any other lexeme, can and does undergo semantic change over time. For example, in the eighteenth century in England the term "politeness" was linked to the court and evoked slightly different connotations than it does today (Stein, 1994). Further evidence for such changes are the numerous lay books on proper (linguistic and behavioral) conduct that have a long tradition in many cultures. Even within our own lifetimes, we can witness that these books

describe slightly changing norms and expectations of proper conduct. All the mentioned changes and differences are interesting to explore from a synchronic as well as from a diachronic and cross-cultural perspective.

It should be stressed that norms are shared by groups of people, who acquire them by being socialized into practices. Social beings exploit knowledge of these norms to achieve their relational aims. For example, they might want to create a "polite" interpersonal effect, or they might wish to challenge relationships by creating "rude" interpersonal effects. In order for this to happen, there must be a certain overlap and shared understanding of norms of behavior. From a methodological point of view, first-order researchers have been caricatured to overemphasize variability and second-order researchers to overdo leveling. However, there is a certain consensus nowadays to look at politeness as a situated, cultural phenomenon, and to work on fruitful combinations of first- and second-order terminology and methodology (Locher & Bousfield, 2008).

Further methodological and theoretical discussions that have been raised center on how cognitive processes can be linked to the creation of relational and social meaning, the role of the recognition of intentions in the process of working out interpersonal meaning, the status of universality within the theoretical politeness frameworks, and the notion of face. The launching of the *Journal of Politeness Research* in 2005 (De Gruyter) bears witness to these new interests in methodological and theoretical issues in the field of politeness studies.

The second important trend in the last years of research is that both first-order and second-order researchers have broadened the scope of interest with respect to the nature of the investigated data. While many studies inspired by Brown and Levinson focused on linguistic speech acts such as requests, apologies, or criticism, which are traditionally associated with face-threatening situations that are conventionally mitigated, more recent studies also focus on explicitly face-damaging or face-aggravating behavior, and the notions of impoliteness and rudeness (see, e.g., Bousfield & Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield & Locher, 2008). Already in 1990, Tracy highlighted that facework does not consist only of face-maintaining behavior, but also of face-enhancing, face-damaging, and face-challenging behavior. This goes hand in hand with Scollon and Scollon's claim (2001, p. 48) that there is no faceless communication, a point that is mirrored in the definition of relational work given above in that the entire spectrum of communication is of interest for research. This field, which is still rather young, witnesses and contributes to the same methodological discussions as "politeness research" in general.

Finally, in many cases we can note that the opening up of the type of data also shows a certain shift in interest—away from a focus on "politeness" or "impoliteness"—to a discussion of the interplay of relational issues and "identity construction." Researchers working with concepts such as "relational work" (Locher & Watts, 2008), "rapport management" (Spencer-Oatey, 2005), and "face constituting theory" (Arundale, 2010), and also scholars interested in identity construction more generally (e.g., Davies & Harré, 1990; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Locher, 2008), are ultimately concerned with the interpersonal or relational aspect of language and how it affects language choices. In order to study these choices, not only contextual factors are considered; cognitive and social-psychological insights also enter the discussion of how people

negotiate interpersonal meaning in particular communities of practice. The field of "politeness" research is thus as vibrant as ever and has broadened in scope and interest.

SEE ALSO: Analysis of Identity in Interaction; Conversational Implicature; Conversation Analysis and Identity in Interaction; Politeness in Computer-Mediated Communication; Politeness and Face Research; Positioning in the Analysis of Discourse and Interaction; Pragmatic Socialization

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