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Politeness, Face and Facework: Current Issues

Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to consider some current issues in the study of linguistic politeness and its relation to the notions of face and facework. These notions have received a myriad of different definitions in pragmatics and sociolinguistics during the last decades. On the basis of the examination of some definitions, it is concluded that the notions of politeness and face should not be equated. In addition, it is stated that the commonsense and the theoretical notions of politeness should be distinguished. The paper also briefly discusses the relationship between epistemic meanings and meanings, related to facework.

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, ‘face’, ‘facework’ and ‘politeness’ have been among the most heavily debated notions in pragmatic and sociolinguistic research. Different kinds of theoretical models concerning these notions have been proposed, and usually they have been defined as abstract terms, directly or indirectly referring to a wide variety of social strategies for constructing co-operative social interaction across cultures. Cross-cultural work and empirical work in wide range of specific languages and cultures have, however, highlighted the socio-cultural variations in the interpretation of these kinds of terms. In recent years, arguments have been presented for the importance of making a clearer distinction between theoretical and commonsense terms in politeness research.

This paper first reviews some current research into linguistic politeness and its relations to the notions of face and facework. Both the theoretical and lay interpretations are discussed. Secondly, the relationship between epistemic modality and facework is briefly considered. This constitutes an area which has up till now been scarcely examined from the cross-linguistic perspective. It is proposed that in the interpretation of the relationship between epistemic meanings and meanings, connected with

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facework, the notion of power is an essential one. The implications of this proposal for the meaning description of epistemic expressions in different kinds of languages are also briefly considered.

2. The notions of politeness and face as theoretical and as commonsense terms

A large number of theoretical and empirical books and articles concerning linguistic politeness and/or the notion of face have been published in the last decades. In most of the studies, the politeness has been conceptualized especially as strategic conflict-avoidance or as strategic construction of cooperative social interaction (cf. Eelen 2001: 21, Watts 2003: 47). The bibliography of politeness-related publications, compiled by Dufon & al. (1994), comprises 51 pages in small print, and a great amount of new research has been amassed since its publication.

It is beyond the limits of this paper to give an exhaustive overview of politeness-related research. Recently, some critical and thorough overviews and analyses of politeness studies have been presented, for example Eelen (2001), Watts (2003) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2003). Much earlier, Fraser (1990) posited four main ways of viewing politeness in the research literature: the “social-norm” view, the “conversational-maxim” view, the “face-saving” view and the “conversational-contract” view. Eelen (2001), too, considers these views, but he uses partly different kinds of notions in comparing them and, in addition, he includes some other theoretical perspectives in his classification of politeness research. According to him, not only the notion of politeness as strategic conflict-avoidance, but also the notion of politeness as social indexing is universal to some extent in various frameworks of politeness (id., 20–29). These two notions originate in Kasper (1990). The idea that politeness should be understood as strategic conflict-avoidance can be found, for example, in the view that the basic social role of politeness is in its ability to function as a way of controlling potential aggression between interactional parties (Brown & Levinson 1987:1), or in the views that connect politeness with smooth communication (Ide 1989:225, 230) or with avoiding disruption and maintaining the social equilibrium and friendly relations (Leech 1983:17, 82). The idea that politeness is involved in social indexing may be interpreted as the idea that politeness is socially appropriate behavior and what is socially appropriate depends on the speaker’s social position in

relation to the hearer. This idea, too, appears in some form or other in most works on politeness.

Rather than presenting various other possible ways of comparing frameworks of politeness on the basis of, for example, Eelen's (2001) detailed analysis, I will now focus on briefly considering Brown & Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness and work criticizing some fundamental assumptions of this theory. It has been the most influential framework of politeness so far, and it provides an important basis for the discussion of the notions of politeness and face in this paper. In the classification of Fraser (1990), Brown & Levinson's theory represents the face-saving view, as it builds on Goffman's (1967) notion of face and on English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'. The face is understood as something that is emotionally invested, and that can be not only lost, but also maintained or enhanced. Brown & Levinson state that every individual has two types of face, positive and negative. They define positive face as the individual's desire that her/his wants be appreciated in social interaction, and negative face as the individual's desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. The theory assumes that most speech acts, for example requests, offers and compliments, inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speaker's face-wants, and that politeness is involved in redressing those face threatening acts (FTA). On the basis of these assumptions, three main strategies for performing speech acts are distinguished: positive politeness, negative politeness and off-record politeness. Positive politeness aims at supporting or enhancing the addressee's positive face, whereas negative politeness aims at softening the encroachment on the addressee's freedom of action or freedom from imposition. The third strategy, off-record politeness, means flouting one of the Gricean (1975) maxims on the assumption that the addressee is able to infer the intended meaning. On a more general level, Gricean model of Cooperative Principle is another building block in Brown & Levinson's theory.

The kind and amount of politeness that the speaker applies to a certain speech act is determined by the weightiness of this speech act. Speakers calculate the weight of their speech acts from three social variables: the perceived social distance between the hearer and the speaker, the perceived power difference between them, and the cultural ranking of the speech act. The latter is defined as the degree to which the FTA is perceived to be threatening within a specific culture. On the basis of the outcome of the calculation, speakers choose the appropriate type of strategy and

substrategy to be employed. Next, they select the appropriate linguistic means by which to accomplish the chosen substrategy. Different linguistic structures realize specific strategic choices. For example, one of the substrategies addressed to the hearer's negative face is 'Be conventionally indirect', and when the speaker selects this strategy for asking to pass the salt, s/he may choose the structure *Could you pass the salt?*

Brown & Levinson (1987) claim their politeness theory to be universally valid. They posit a universal Model Person with the ability to rationalize form communicative goals to the optimal means of achieving these goals. This Model Person can be seen as the embodiment of universally valid human social characteristics and principles of social reasoning (Eelen 2001:5). Brown & Levinson, however, admit that much cultural elaboration is expected on the level of, for example, what kinds of speech acts threaten face, what kinds of politeness strategies are preferred and what kinds of social relationships will trigger face-protective strategies.

Most of the research into politeness since the 1987 republication of Brown & Levinson's theory in book may be characterized as somehow related to Brown & Levinson's theory (cf. Watts 2003: 98–99). The theory has been the preferred framework, for example, in empirical work on particular types of speech acts in a wide range of languages and cultures and in cross-cultural work considering the ways in which two or more cultures differ in their realizations of politeness. Various aspects of this theory have also been widely criticized. However, only sporadic attempts have been made to suggest alternative frameworks.

Brown & Levinson (1987) base their theoretical assumptions on data from just three languages, English, Tzeltal and Tamil, and therefore the claim for universality may naturally be criticized. One of the central themes in post-Brown & Levinson research on politeness has been the universality versus cultural relativity of the notion of politeness, and at the heart of this discussion have been Brown & Levinson's use of the term face and the conceptualisation of politeness as a set of rational strategies to soften the potentially unwelcome effects of face-threatening (cf., for example, Watts 2003: 99–125). The notion of face has been in use as a metaphor in different cultures of the world for a very long time. It has metaphorically referred to individual qualities and/or abstract entities such as honor, respect, esteem and the self. Among the seminal works on the notion of face were Hu (1944) and Goffman (1967), who draws on Hu's description of the Chinese 'face'. Chinese scholars have interpreted Chinese notion of face as an essentially public and positive concept, consisting of three

positive face-types (Lim 1994), and as a situational construct, as firmly embedded in situational interpersonal relations (Ho 1994). Chinese scholars have also provided thorough and consistent critiques of Brown & Levinson's work (see e.g. Gu 1990, Mao 1994 and Lim 1994). One of the major criticisms, presented by them, is that Brown & Levinson assume an individualistic concept of face, which is not appropriate to cultures with broad value tendencies in emphasizing the importance of ingroup interests over individual wants. They have also questioned the validity of the Brown & Levinson's notion of negative face in cultures where the individual's freedom of thought and action are determined by the social status that the individual has in the group. In a similar vein, several researchers from other Asian cultures, as well as from Islamic and African cultures, have criticized the individualistic interpretation of face and/or the validity of the notion of negative face in Brown & Levinson's theory (e.g. Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1993, Nwoye 1992; see also Watts 2003: 102–103 for further references). On the other hand, at least some Japanese researchers, like Fukushima (2002) and Takano (2005), regard both the positive and negative face as important in contemporary Japanese society, and especially Fukushima argues that the notion of Japanese face does not involve only the relations to others, but also the rights of individuals.

As mentioned above, the Brown & Levinson (1987) account of politeness strategies has also been under discussion in politeness research. It has been criticized as overly pessimistic view of social interaction. For example, Nwoye (1992:311) states that according to the Brown & Levinson interpretation of politeness, 'social interaction becomes an activity of continuous mutual monitoring of potential threats to the faces of the interactants', and if this view were always true, it 'could rob social interaction of all elements of pleasure'. Werkhofer (1992:156) argues that the Brown & Levinson account of politeness is essentially individualistic: it presents the speaker as a rational agent who at least during the generation of utterances is unconstrained by social considerations and is thus free to select egocentric, asocial and aggressive intentions. One of the major problems with Brown & Levinson's model is also the setting out the choices open to the speakers in the form of a decision-tree through which they have to work their way before they can arrive at the appropriate utterances in which to frame the FTA (see e.g. Watts 2003:88). This kind of system also excludes the possibility that two or more strategies might be chosen at the same time.

The variables of social distance, power and the degree of seriousness of the imposition in the Brown & Levinson framework have been a further contentious issue. According to Werkhofer (1992:176), the three social variables represent a narrow approach to social realities, as they are defined as static entities that determine polite meanings. This kind of approach neglects the dynamic aspects of social language use.

One of the many researchers who have advocated the dynamic approach to describing language use in recent years is Watts (1992, 2003). I will now consider some main aspects of his view on politeness and face, since this view is essential for the further discussion of these notions in this paper. Throughout his book (2003), Watts argues for a radically new way of looking at linguistic politeness. He aims to show that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between the commonsense or lay notion of (im)politeness and the theoretical notion of (im)politeness. The need to make this kind of distinction is emphasized by Eelen (2001), too. The commonsense notion is referred to by first-order (im)politeness ((im)politeness1), and the theoretical notion is referred to by second-order (im)politeness ((im)politeness2). Politeness1 is a socio-psychological notion that is used for the various ways in which members of sociocultural groups talk about polite language usage, whereas politeness2 is a theoretical, linguistic notion in a sociolinguistic theory of politeness. Watts (2003:1–17) states that the terms polite and politeness and their rough lexical equivalents in other languages may vary in the meanings and connotations associated with them from one group of speakers to the next—even from one individual speaker to the next. According to him, some examples of lay interpretations of polite language usage are ‘the language a person uses to avoid being too direct’, ‘language which displays respect towards or consideration for others’, or ‘language that displays certain “polite” formulaic utterances like *please*, *thank you*, *excuse me* or *sorry*’. On the other hand, some people may consider the polite use of language as, for example, ‘hypocritical’, ‘dishonest’ or ‘distant’. As regards a general level of polite behavior, some people feel that polite behavior is equivalent to socially correct or appropriate behavior, while others consider it to be the hallmark of the cultivated person etc. The purpose of Watts is to show that the nature of politeness1 (as well as impoliteness1) is inherently evaluative. He argues that (im)politeness1 is a locus of social struggle over discursive practices. On his view, this very fact should be the central focus of a theory of politeness. So, a theory of politeness2 should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness1, or in other words, over the

ways in which (im)polite behavior is evaluated and commented on by lay people.

Watts (2003) bases his theory of politeness on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of social practice and his own theory of emergent networks. Using data from naturally occurring English verbal interaction and his personal experience, he develops an argument that politeness theory can never be fully equated with face theory. He attempts to show that, in fact, Brown & Levinson (1987) change the Goffman (1967) notion of face, and he suggests a return to Goffman's conceptualization of face. Goffman defines face as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact'. In addition, it is 'an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes (...)' Watts states that if this conceptualization of face is accepted, we must accept that we are attributed face socially in accordance with the line or lines we have adopted for the purposes of some communicative interaction. This means that we can be assigned different faces on different occasions of verbal interaction and that all social interaction is predicated on individuals' face needs, i.e. that we can never get away from negotiating facework. In situations in which one participant needs to take particular care not to damage another participant's face, that participant will do everything to avoid face-threatening. This kind of facework is supportive. On the other hand, some situations sanction the display of face-threatening, i.e. aggressive facework.

Both the supportive facework and the sanctioned aggressive facework lie inside the boundaries of behavior, linguistic or otherwise, that Watts (2003) calls politic behavior. This term is defined by him as the behavior which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction. As regards the notion of politeness¹, Watts presents it as being behavior in excess of politic behavior, which allows for much leeway with respect to the disputability of the notion (im)polite¹. Because (im)politeness¹ is disputable, it follows that no linguistic structures can be taken to be inherently polite. Watts considers a fair amount of highly conventionalized formulaic (e.g. *thank you, please, no trouble at all*) and semi-formulaic (e.g. *Close the door, will you? Can I have another piece of cake? Let me help you with those bags.*) expressions in English that are often interpreted as expressions of politeness. His aim is to demonstrate that at least in English, linguistic structures do not in themselves denote politeness. Rather, they lend themselves to individual interpretation as polite in instances of ongoing verbal interaction. He states that we need to

know something about the situation in which linguistic structures occur in order to evaluate whether they form part of the politic behavior of that situation or whether they are beyond what can be expected of it and are thus potentially open to interpretation by participants as polite.

I subscribe to the view of Watts (2003) that politeness theory and face theory should not be equated. Politeness as a commonsense term is a value-laden, disputable notion, and these properties are not adequately captured by the theory like Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory which claims that politeness is involved in redressing various kinds of face-threatening acts. However, the radically new account of linguistic politeness and facework, suggested by Watts, is not without problems. First, although the Goffman (1967) notion of face, on which Watts draws, is more social than Brown & Levinson's elaboration of this notion, it has some distinctly individualistic traits. As Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) states in her careful analysis of Goffman's notion of face, this individualistic emphasis appears to be woven into a socio-psychological construct of face, which is commonly thought to have originated in China. Therefore, it is questionable whether Goffman's—and Watts'—definition of face provides an adequate basis for describing the use of linguistic expressions in facework in cultures which emphasize group identity over individual identity. Second, the definition of politeness¹ as behavior in excess of politic, i.e. appropriate behavior seems to me morally involved definition, although this kind of definition is what Watts tries to avoid. Throughout his book, he argues that the notion of politeness is extremely variable, disputable notion among lay members of society, and one of the lay interpretations of politeness is appropriate behavior. Thus, the definition of politeness¹ by Watts excludes a part of the variation in commonsense interpretations. However, in the end of the book, Watts (2003: 258) submits that in practice, certain utterances that lie within the scope of politic behavior may be open to interpretation as polite. I would suggest, following Eelen (2001: 253–256), that the notion of politeness¹ is in need of further investigation. Different kinds of research methods should be used to investigate ordinary people's notions of politeness: informal interviews or examples of actual politeness evaluations. The third problem in Watts' theory concerns his interpretation of face as related to different occasions of verbal interaction. It is at least possible that there are differences between cultures in the degree to which face is constantly renegotiable. This hypothesis should be tested cross-culturally.

3. Further research

Instead of summarizing the discussion in Chapter 2, I will here briefly and in general outlines describe the study of facework in different types of languages I am working on. In this study, I assume, like Watts (2003), that politeness and face are different kinds of notions, although they are related in many ways. Facework consists partly of utterances that are open to interpretation as polite. My discourse analysis also draws on Ting-Toomey's (2005) face negotiation theory. Basing her theory on extensive cross-cultural research, Ting-Toomey distinguishes several face content domains: autonomy face, inclusion face, approval face, reliability face, competence face, and moral face. The boundaries between face domains are permeable and overlapped. It seems to me that the assumption that facework has several possible content topics is necessary in order to explain the variation in facework cross-linguistically and in specific languages. Ting-Toomey also makes an important distinction between individualistic and collectivistic value tendencies. Different cultures cannot be simply defined as either individualistic or collectivistic, but if individualism versus collectivism is interpreted as a value dimension, it can serve as a frame in explaining why individuals differ in their face expectations and face concerns in different cultures.

The focus of my study is the relationship between epistemic meanings and different kinds of meanings related to facework. Different types of languages have expressions, such as English *possibly* or *surely*, the prototypical meaning of which is epistemic. It is possible to describe these meanings by means of the values of dimensions, for example "the speaker's uncertainty that P (=proposition)" or "the speaker's certainty that P". In actual discourses, these values may be negotiated. Cross-linguistically, it is an interesting fact that epistemic expressions are often used in various kinds of facework, for example in mitigating or supportive function. For example, a Russian parenthetical expression *možet byt'* 'maybe' is often used in questions in order to mitigate a request, an offer or a suggestion. These kinds of meanings are also described by means of dimensions and their values. One of the dimensions is a power-dimension, indicating the perceived power relations between the speaker and the hearer. The notion of power is understood not as static and unchanging, but as constantly negotiable (cf. Ng & Bradac 1993). By means of various kinds of epistemic expressions, it is possible to exercise power by mitigating the harshness of an influence message. One part of background

knowledge that is needed in describing the various meanings of epistemic expressions can be metaphorically understood as a multidimensional semantic space. The dimensions of the space have many connections, and therefore it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between, for example, an epistemic meaning and a mitigating meaning in actual discourse. Thus, in meaning categories of epistemic expressions, the boundaries between epistemic meanings and mitigating meanings are fuzzy.

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