THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VALUING LINGUISTIC POLITENESS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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Abstract

Politeness has been discussed from different perspectives, i.e. pragmatics, sociolinguistics, the social psychology of language, psycholinguistics, developmental psychology, and anthropology. However, most authors seem to agree that politeness is a feature of language use. It is indicated that the politeness of linguistic acts is determined by their occurrence in communicative contexts rather than by inherent properties, pushes the issue even further by noting that being 'polite' is attributable only to speakers' conduct, it is the conduct itself, whether in form of language use or other behaviours, that is routinely assessed as more or less polite relative to community values and norms (Fraser, 1990, Kasper, 1997). Thus, politeness is a crucial element of interpersonal communication in all cultures. This paper evaluates theories commonly used to approach the universality and the relativity of the issue.

Abstrak

Politeness sebagai kajian kebahasaan telah didiskusikan dari berbagai perspektif, seperti: pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psikologi sosial bahasa, psikolinguistik, psikologi perkembangan, dan antropologi. Akan tetapi semua ahli nampaknya bersepakat bahwa issue politeness sesungguhnya fitur dari penggunaan bahasa. Hal ini ditunjukkan oleh perilaku linguistik politeness banyak ditentukan oleh konteks komunikasi itu sendiri, sehingga menjadi property inheren dalam bentuk penggunaan bahasa dan perilaku kebahasaan yang setiap saat bisa dibandingkan dengan perilaku kebahasaan yang kurang pas (sopan) berdasarkan cara pandang masyarakat pengguna bahasa tertentu (Fraser, 1990, Kasper, 1997). Dengan demikian politeness merupakan faktor krusial dalam komunikasi interpersonal setiap budaya. Tulisan ini mencoba mengevaluasi teori-teori terkait yang lazim digunakan dalam mendekati universalitas dan relativitas politeness.

Kata-kata kunci:Politenes, universal, cultural property, value

1. Background

In this paper, I will argue that politeness is one of the most important symbolic values to be socialized in our daily encounters as all cultures value politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Although what constitutes polite behaviour, for instance in the interest

of saving *face*, varies from culture to culture (Eastman, 1990), politeness is also universal cross-culturally (Clyne, 1994, Morand, 1996, Scollon and Scollon, 1995). It is universal because humans in every culture appear to share a very broad set of linguistic politeness conventions. Thus, it is a crucial element of interpersonal communication in all cultures.

Politeness has been approached differently according to the researchers' interests, as what is polite in one culture may not be considered polite in another. Hence, politeness is culturally relative: sensitive to particular situation-specific social norms. Politeness in this section will not be discussed in-depth and only theories relevant to this study will be referred to. Their relevance will be seen from the perspectives of both sociolinguistics and pragmatics, it also involves the performance and interpretation of a range of speech acts. The basic premise adopted here is that politeness has to do with language use which warrants its classification within pragmatics. Politeness is also a phenomenon which relates language and the social world which warrants its classification within sociolinguistics (Eelen, 2001). The notion of politeness in this paper, once again, will be discussed from a socio-cultural perspective. However, general theories about politeness will be considered first.

2. Theoretical approach

Lakoff's (1973) seminal work on politeness has been considered the foundation work on modern politeness theory. There has been an impressive number of investigations into politeness in language from various perspectives and disciplines since then. The research is mainly done to promote awareness and seek a better insight into the various issues related to politeness in language (Lakoff, 1990). It is not surprising, therefore, that politeness as a starting point for research has received attention in the area of linguistics and the notion has received a myriad of different definitions and interpretations; ranging from a general principle of language use governing all interpersonal aspects of interaction, to the use of specific linguistic forms and formulae (Eelen, 2001, Held, 1992).

Lakoff (1990) defines politeness as:

'...a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange' (p.34).

Lakoff (1990) indicates the importance of maintaining a harmonious relation between the participants during the interaction. Her point of departure is a criticism of weaknesses in the traditional theory underlying Grice's (1967: 45) Cooperative Principle (CP). Grice assumes that people are intrinsically cooperative and aim to be as informative as possible in communication. To capture this intention, Grice proposes four maxims:

1. Maxims of Quantity: (1) Make your contribution as informative as is required. (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. 2. Maxims of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true. (1). Do not say what you believe to be false. (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 3. Maxim of Relation: Be relevant. 4. Maxims of Manner: Be perspicuous. (1) Avoid obscurity of expression. (2) Avoid ambiguity. (3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). (4) Be orderly.

Grice (1975) further argues that when any of these four maxims are flouted, they may result in linguistic aberrations. But, when they are obeyed, clarity in communication can be reached. It is evident that in daily encounters, however, the way people interact with each other cannot be based on fixed rules. This argument has been used to challenge Grice's theory of conversational implicature. Keenan (1977), for instance, claims that Grice's conversational maxims are parochial, not universal. Keenan's claim is true because for cultural, social and psychological reasons, cooperation is not the pervasive goal of certain communications. Labov's (1972) study on language change, for instance, has shown that power and associated prestige are factors involved in change. This situation is equally true in the situation where cultural values prioritize the importance of hierarchy and social status in communication. Upadhyay (2001) points out that hierarchy is a fundamental basis for social relationships in Nepali society and that 'language forms as politeness strategies are used non-reciprocally' (p.335).

Based on data from intercultural communication in Australia, Clyne (1994) argues that not all of Grice's (1975) maxims are applicable in multilingual settings. For instance, according to Clyne, Grice's first maxim (maxim of quantity): 'Do not make your contribution more informative than is required', raises a problem in content-oriented cultures - Continental European and East/South-east Asian perceive that, under particular

circumstances, the more information given the better. Therefore, Clyne (1994) suggests that CP needs to be reformulated for it to be used to tackle the issue of politeness in different cultures. He also rewords Grice's quality and manner maxims to make them less culture-specific.

Lakoff's proposal clearly emphasizes the importance of the social aspect of communication, because, socially, it is hard to follow Grice's CP. Therefore, Lakoff's politeness rules are accommodated in: 'Don't impose' (rule 1), 'Give options' (rule 2); and 'Make A feel good' (rule 3) (Lakoff, 1973: 298). Culturally speaking, although these rules are to some extent always present in any interaction, different cultures may apply these principles differently. What is significant about Lakoff's idea is that the way people define politeness may differ interculturally. Depending on which of the rules is most crucial, cultures can be said to adhere to a strategy of Distance (rule 1), Deference (rule 2), Camaraderie (rule 3) (Lakoff, 1990:35). Distance is characterized as a strategy of impersonality, Deference as hesitancy and Camaraderie as informality. Roughly, according to Eelen (2001), European cultures tend to emphasize Distancing strategies, Asian cultures tend to be Deferential, and modern American culture tends towards Camaraderie.

Drawing on Goffman's (1967) notion on *face*, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) are the next most influential theoreticians in politeness. 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. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes' (p.5).

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) develop a fundamental theory of politeness based on three unrelated languages and cultures - English, Tamil (a Dravidian language), and Tzeltal (a Mayan language). Central to their theory is the notion of *face*. Thus, all participants are supposed to maintain two types of face during interaction: 'positive' face (paying attention to others' face needs) and 'negative' face (ensuring that the other is not imposed on). Thus, in the spirit of maintaining *face*, interactants are supposed to minimize Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) such as criticisms, disagreements and embarrassing during their interaction. Brown and Levinson also suggest that during these *Vol. 15. No. 28 Maret 2008-06-19*

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FTA moments, we commonly utilize an array of linguistic strategies, or 'politeness behaviours', in order to mitigate or defray interpersonal conflict.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) argue that there are three social variables in determining the level of politeness between the speaker and the addressee: the degree of relative power (P), social distance (D), and relative ranking of impositions in the particular culture (R). They note that P, D, and R can be assumed 'to subsume most of the culturally specific social determinants of FTA expression' (p. 16). In addition, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) propose five politeness strategies: (1) Baldly on record; (2) Positive politeness; (3) Negative politeness; (4) Indirection; and (5) FTA. In other words, Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory provides significant contribution in the field of linguistics for researchers to understand the phenomenon of politeness in human daily encounters. Their notion of *face*, however, has stimulated a prolific amount of discussion.

Trees and Manusov's (1998) study - female-friendship dyads as the University of Washington indicates that Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory presents a comprehensive picture of *face* as an interpersonal aspect of strategic language use in terms of shaping and being shaped by relationships. However, they argue further that while verbal politeness was still the bigger factor in perceptions of politeness, the role of the non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and brow movements, gestures and touch should also be taken into account, as they are salient for the interpretation of an utterance.

According to Haugh (2003) Brown and Levinson's face just emphasizes the importance of verbal expressions per se rather than accommodating cultural norms and values. While the norms and values are essentially expectation about 'what people should show they think of others, or what people should show they think of themselves' (p. 399). He notes that to understand the nature of politeness in its real sense we need to look at how language operates at the discourse level, as it is not enough only at the utterance level. Similarly, using Mainland Greek and Cyprus language data, Terkourafi (1999) points to the need to view politeness as less dependent on Brown and Levinson's *face* 'wants' alone because it is evident that solidarity in in-group relationships motivates the widespread use of diminutives in both languages.

From a cultural point of view, the notion of *face* is also questioned by Gu (1990). Gu discusses politeness under the concept of *limao* 'politeness' phenomena in modern

Chinese to counter Brown and Levinson's theory. Chinese *limao* covers respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement. Gu makes a critical comparison between western notions of *face* and politeness and their Chinese counterparts. Gu argues that in the Chinese context, the notion of *face* is not to be seen in terms of wants as claimed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), but rather in terms of societal norms. Hence, politeness is not just instrumental, it is above all normative. *Face* is threatened not when people's individual wants are not met, but rather when they fail to live up to social standards.

Similarly, Ide (1989) argues that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness does not provide an adequate explanatory account of Japanese politeness phenomena. According to Ide, Brown and Levinson's theory is too concerned with strategic interaction, that is, the speaker uses a verbal strategy in order to attain individual goals. This kind of politeness allows the speaker a considerably active choice, she labels it 'Volition' and contrasts it with 'Discernment', which she claims is a second and separate component of politeness specifically prominent in Japanese. Discernment is developed based on Japanese use of honorific forms, for Ide regards Brown and Levinson's frameworks as inadequate. She also notes that Japanese politeness does not depend so much on the speaker's free will, but on socially obligatory verbal (grammatical) choices. Thus, she adds, it is also impossible to apply Gricean maxims to Japanese as there are no socially neutral forms, and the speaker must always choose between honorific and non-honorific forms.

Upadhyay's (2001) study on identity and politeness in Nepali argues that politeness should be approached from socio-cultural aspects of particular communities, as the heart of politeness lies in the socio-cultural norms. He implies that politeness cannot be understood just from a linguistic point of view, but should be viewed as a form of behaviour involving various language forms selected in accordance with the norms and expectations of a particular society. He adds, an appropriate selection of words influences both social and psychological meanings.

In brief, although Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness has been considered as universal in language usage, this section has indicated that there is no single politeness theory that universally handles politeness phenomena. The arguments in

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the studies presented here indicate that the cultural relativity of normative levels of politeness requires the approaches implemented to be modified or adapted based on a particular culture and language. Hence, there is no cultural standard to claim that one is better or more polite than the others.

3. Cultural universality and relativity of politeness

Cross-cultural pragmatics and contrastive pragmatics deal with the ways in which speech acts such as requesting, promising, apologizing, thanking, complaining, and complementing are manifested within different languages and cultures. Most studies on speech acts contrast English with a limited but expanding number of other languages (Clyne, 1994, Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1994).

The notion of speech acts has been claimed as one of the most important phenomena for the study of language use (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989, Clyne, 1994, Kasper, 1994). An important aspect of contrasting speech act realizations between languages and cultures is the different levels of directness and indirectness in the expression of politeness (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989). For instance, in House and Kasper's study (1981), some speech acts, such as complaint and request, were realized more directly by the learners than by the English speakers or by the German speakers using German.

The principal distinctions between direct and indirect speech acts, for instance, lies in the fact that in direct or more direct speech acts the speaker says what he/she wants, while indirect or less direct speech acts the speaker may mean more than he/she says. Searle (1975) indicates that certain types of indirectness are conventionally used to perform certain acts.

The most famous contrastive work on speech acts is Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) based on the findings of the *Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project* (CCSARP). This study contrasted aspects of language use in Argentinian Spanish; Australian English; Canadian French; German German, and Israeli Hebrew. This project was designed to examine cross-cultural and intralingual variation in two speech acts: requests and apologies, two potentially face-threatening acts (see, Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987). Blum-Kulka (1989) found variation in sub-strategies of 'conversational indirectness' in

request. Hebrew speakers opted less than the others for *can/could* and they opted most for *possibility* and *willingness/readiness*; and the Argentinian Spanish speakers opted more than the others for *prediction*. Australian English speakers tend to opt for the *least direct communicative behaviour*, followed by Germans, French Canadians, Israelis, and Argentinians. However, Israelis and Australians use about the same proportion of *hints*, closely followed by Canadian French speakers, whereas Germans and Argentinians do not employ them much (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989). For apologies, there was a large degree of inter-cultural agreement in the choice of strategies (Olshtain, 1989). There were, however, subtle inter-group differences in the use of the expression of responsibility, according to situation.

In his study contrasting types of sensitivity between South-east Asians and Anglo-Australians, Platt (1989) draws attention to areas such as engaging, disengaging, requesting, accepting or declining an offer or invitation. He notes that in new communication sub-systems, such as Singapore English, more direct rules may be applied than in area in which L1 contributes to be used as the main medium of communication, such as China. In his research on communication in South Africa, Chick (1989) lists some barriers to effective inter-cultural communication: interlingual interference, different (socio-cultural) frames of reference; variation in the importance of face saving; different listening behaviour; different ways of regulating turn taking, and different politeness behaviour.

All studies indicate that, in intercultural communication, participants from different cultural backgrounds to a large extent are influenced by their cultural norms and values in operating speech style. Thus, in terms of politeness, the above findings suggest that polite expressions of particular behaviour and utterances by certain interlocutors from a particular language and culture may be considered less polite by speakers of another language and cultural background. In this sense, the approach of cross-cultural pragmatics is worthwhile in tackling the issue of diversity.

4. Tackling the issue of politeness in Indonesia

In the Indonesian context, politeness has been tackled according to different terms, such as speech level and linguistic etiquette. In Indonesia, Javanese is the language whose speech styles has been studied most. The seminal work of Geertz (1960) on the religion of Java – a discussion on the role of Javanese priyai 'aristocrat' belief and etiquette in the Javanese politeness system – has been used as a point of departure by other scholars regarding language and culture. *Etiquette* has been used by Geertz (1960) to represent both the cultural norms and language use as distinct from an emphasis given only to the utterance. Geertz asserted the importance of speech style in the Javanese system as it carries what he called 'status meaning'. 'Status meaning' refers to the way in which Javanese words are used in real conversation, as the lexical choices do not refer only to literal meaning, but also convey connotative meanings concerning the status of both the addresser and the addressee. For instance, there are four major principle animate priyayi's etiquette: 'the proper form for the proper rank, indirection, dissimulation, and the avoidance of any act suggesting disorder or lack of self control' (p. 243). Under 'the proper form for the proper rank' comes the all-important matter of the correct choice of linguistic form. The andap-asor pattern, for example, refers to humbling oneself towards anyone who is either of equal rank or higher. In other words, etiquette in Javanese regulates language and its appropriate social norms, which means that language use reflects the values that underlie it.

Uhlenbeck (1970) has also explored the Javanese linguistic system and the cultural values underlay it. He analyses Javanese in terms of semantics, morphology and phonology. Although his account was not pursued to completion, his suggestion concerning the need to study the Javanese language in terms of style and politeness has been followed up by scholars, such as Wolfowitz (1991), Errington (1988) and Berman (1998). According to Uhlenbeck (1970, 1978), in the Javanese metalinguistic system, the terms *krama* 'honorific' and '*ngoko* 'non-honorific' are used to describe native conceptions of Javanese language in use. He further states:

'In order to be considered a *krama* – sentence it is not necessary that the sentence contains only *krama* elements. The presence of one single *krama* word or *krama*-morpheme in a sentence which otherwise contains only words neutral to the distinction *krama-ngoko*, suffices for characterizing the whole sentence as *krama*. The ambiguity of the Javanese terminology reflects the important fact that a complete description of the Javanese forms of respect requires attention not only to their paradigmatic aspect, that is to the lexical-morphological relations between the various items

involved., but also to their syntagmatic aspect, that is to their co-occurrence in the sentence. In the existing literature this requirement has not always been recognized (p. 442)'.

Following Geertz's notion of (1960) 'etiquette', Errington (1988) has used the term in a wider sense to study Javanese language and social norms. However, instead of using 'speech level' to study at the speech system, he follows Uhlenbeck's definition of (1970) 'speech style'. This is because 'speech level' indicates a sense of categorical rigidity, while 'speech style' refers to the dynamic fluidity which may occur in a single interactive event and even in a single utterance. Errington (1988) asserts that, in Javanese, speaking is integrated with other facets of behaviour: 'sitting, standing, pointing, composing one's countenance, and so on – and is realized with them in social context' (p.11). Therefore, Errington proposes that signs of politeness in Javanese language may elaborate address styles focused on 'non-lexical, grammatico-syntactic apparatus and toward expressions of deference focused on lexemes in the domain of person' (p. 226).

Wolfowitz's (1983) study on 'styles of speech in Suriname-Javanese' focuses on stylistic expression of 'close politeness' or 'connectedness'. She distinguishes three distinct speech styles: ordinary, formal, and respect indicated by Suriname-Javanese. In the ordinary style, stylization takes the form of exaggeration – dramatic intonation, expressive interjections, reiterated vocatives. A formal speech style is indicated by a sharp asymmetry of close relationships, but stylistically negates directional quality, rather than dramatizing or mediating it. The common linguistic markers of formal lexical style are: 'yes', no', and 'who', which eliminate the echo of domestic interrogatives, imperatives, and response. Respect style dramatizes the asymmetry of family too, but with mediating elements: intonation is a placating or indulgent croon, with or without dramatic exaggeration. Wolfowitz also notes that in the Suriname-Javanese community lexical politeness is endangered as a result of progression of generations.

Sundanese speech style also reflects the community's social strata. However, stratification in this society is treated in a modern perspective by Anderson (1997) who studies Sundanese speech levels. He argues that the selection of speech level in Sundanese ordinary conversations is based on social relation, and functions to indicate the relative status of interlocutors. Anderson interprets this from a more dynamic and

modern perspective, rather than a static and conventional one. For instance, the term

'upper stratum' is used to classify those who have a position in the society, based on

wealth, education, and employment in government administration. To such people, a

speaker in Sundanese is supposed to show respect in the form of the higher level of

language. For instance, in Sundanese social interaction, lemes 'high' level has been used

to address an older speaker of higher status by a younger speaker of lower social status.

Discussing about politeness in the Indonesian context has used different terms to

refer to the issue: speech style, speech level and etiquette. Studies have shown the use of

speech style based on the relative status of the interlocutors. The Javanese speech levels

index the relationship that exists between specific members of the community, through

lexical choices that reflect their social relations as close or distant. In other words, the

importance of unggah-ungguh ing basa – which is translated as 'the relative values of

language' by Errington (1988) to cover the notion of both linguistic and non-linguistic in

the Javanese speech system - has contributed to a thorough understanding of the ways in

which the system works. In the case of Sundanese, social status has been interpreted from

a dynamic perspective.

5. Conclusion

The notion of politeness has been described by employing contrastive pragmatics

and especially the role of directness levels in different languages and cultures. It has been

indicated that discourse patterns of speech acts vary cross-culturally. The cross-cultural

pragmatics framework helps to account for the variety of patterns in different culture.

This suggests that speech acts, such as requesting, promising, apologizing, thanking,

complaining, and complementing are manifested differently within different languages

and cultures.

In the Indonesian context, politeness has been used in different terms to handle

the issue, i.e. speech style, speech level and etiquette. Thus far, studies have shown the

use of speech style based on the relative status of the interlocutors. The Javanese speech

levels, for example, index the relationship that exists between specific members of the

community, through lexical choices that reflect their social relations as close or distant.

This appears to be relevant to handle the case of politeness in the Indonesian context.

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