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# POLITENESS AND POWER

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linguistic politeness has developed as a significant and challenging field of research, much of which is cross-cultural and involving researchers on a global scale. The work of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) on politeness universals, which focuses on the notion of **face** and **face-threatening acts** and is strongly influenced by Goffman, has stimulated a large amount of research, exercised immense influence and is still the canonical model against which much of the literature on linguistic politeness defines itself. Although Brown and Levinson's model, involving concepts of **negative face** and **positive face** and the consequent generation of a series of **negative politeness** and **positive politeness** strategies, has been widely criticized, it is only recently that their basic paradigm has been seriously challenged. An important aspect of that challenge has centred on the relationship between politeness and **power**.

Brown and Levinson's own work makes little attempt to deal with different discourse types, although it is based on empirical evidence from three widely divergent languages and cultures. In fairness, Brown and Levinson (1987) do include power as a crucial component of their well known formula for computing the weightiness of face-threatening acts, and much of the empirical work generated by their theories addresses the issue of 'power' in some way, particularly in conjunction with the **speech act** of requesting. But again, it was Robin Lakoff (1989) who first argued explicitly well over a decade ago not only that politeness and power are closely related but that the relationship

between them could be insightfully clarified if theories of politeness were extended to include professional and institutional contexts, which force us to see politeness from a different perspective, since many of these contexts involve a built-in asymmetry of power and **social status**.

## DEFINING THE FIELD

Given the large literature and the huge theoretical baggage which has accumulated around both 'power'and 'politeness', perhaps it is not so surprising that their conjunction has proved problematic. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to attempt to offer a conclusive definition of either term. Instead, I shall first of all present, very briefly and in summary form, Brown and Levinson's model of politeness and power, followed by a review of how recent work challenges that paradigm in relation to certain important issues being debated in the field. Brown and Levinson (1987: 76) propose a specific formula for assessing the weightiness (W) of a face-threatening act, which involves three essential components: power (P), social distance (D) and the rating of impositions to the extent that they interfere with an individual's face wants within a particular culture/ society (R):

Brown and Levinson maintain that, as a consequence, these three 'dimensions' (D, P, R) contribute to the seriousness of a face-threatening act (FTA), and thus to a determination of the level of politeness with which, other things being equal, an FTA will be communicated (Brown and Levinson 1987: 76).

Thus the greater the social distance and the power hierarchy between speaker and hearer the more weight becomes attached to a face-threatening act, particularly one which also involves a relatively high level of imposition (for example, many requests, accusations, some offers, and so on). Brown and Levinson further argue that these dimensions subsume all other relevant factors in any particular context and, importantly, that their formula thus predicts further that individuals will choose a higher level of linguistic mitigation as the weightiness of an FTA increases proportionately.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 77) conceptualize power (P) as 'an asymmetric social dimension of relative power', i.e. 'P (H, S) is the degree to which H [hearer] can impose his [*sic*] own plans and his self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's [speaker] plans and self-evaluation'.

## Conceptualizing politeness as contestable rather than predominantly normative

Politeness has proved as hard to define as power, and, as with power, more recent work has tended to regard politeness as a 'contested concept' rather than as one which is predominantly normative. Making use of Bourdieu's notion of **habitus**, Eelen (2001) argues that politeness is most productively analyzed not as a system or a normative set of prescripts but, once again, as a social practice which is both dynamic and interactive, with variability seen as a positive component that builds into human communication a capacity for social and cultural

negotiation and change rather than as an inconvenience which must be argued away or concealed.

One of the consequences of this way of approaching politeness is to reject Brown and Levinson's notion that certain speech acts (such as requests, orders, offers, accusations, and so on) are inherently face threatening and, inconsequence, the primary motivation of a speaker is to select both strategies and linguistic forms which serve to mitigate the face threat, particularly when the hearer is more powerful than the speaker.

There are several consequences of taking such a view. First of all, as most recent writers would maintain, the emphasis of most research in past decades has been on linguistic politeness rather than **impoliteness**, which has been studied far less often. Impoliteness can no longer be seen merely as the polar opposite of politeness, and the relationship between them is a much less straightforward one.

Second, a version of politeness as social practice places particular emphasis on the interactive context, and most recent work on politeness and power involves a version of context which applies at a number of different levels of analysis, including the type of speech event, the immediate physical context, the topic being discussed, social and cultural expectations of the participants, **gender**, **age**, education, status and power differences, distance and affect between interactants, personal histories, and so on. Mills (2004) suggests that the notion of **communities of practice** is a particularly useful one, especially in view of the difficulty of defining a culture or a society, if we add 'a wider

notion of the social and an awareness of the pressure that institutions can exert on communities and individuals' (Mills 2004: 197).

## Negotiation of status and identity

Locher (2004) suggests that in both informal social situations and more formal discourse contexts (her examples of the latter are a university staff meeting, a political radio interview, extracts from a US Supreme Court hearing and a televised presidential debate), the exercise of power and politeness often tends to involve the negotiation of status and, more generally, **identity**. Clearly, the degree of negotiation is constrained, especially in institutional contexts, by interactants' formal positions of power (or powerlessness), but Locher demonstrates that, even in the case of the radio interview which involves the US President, there is a surprising amount of negotiation of both power and identity. In the workplace, where once again power hierarchies tend to be structural, Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 163) conclude that 'power and politeness consistently emerge as important dimensions constraining the ways in which participants negotiate and resolve miscommunication and problematic issues at work', particularly where there is a difference in relative status between the interactants. Identity and status are discursively negotiable, though not without constraints and boundaries, even in situations where power is explicitly exercised and 'politeness' is a crucial component of this process of negotiation.

## Some methodological implications

There are a number of methodological implications which are raised by recent work on the interface between politeness and power. Perhaps the most significant is the willingness of researchers to draw on other disciplines and the focus on qualitative rather than quantitative methods. Locher (2004: 30) argues conclusively that 'power is thus a concept that needs a qualitative analysis of data in order to become sufficiently identifiable for discussion', though her own work does make use of a relatively limited amount of quantitative data, mainly to support her fine-grained qualitative analyses of lengthy stretches of discourse. All the other writers (Holmes and Stubbe, Mills, Watts, and Eelen) also focus strongly on qualitative analysis, with Eelen (2001: 141) and Mills (2003: 43) in different ways defending this position most explicitly. A further important trend is the emphasis on the collection of natural language data as evidence (and away from the use of questionnaires except as supplementary to the primary data) and on interactive spoken language. Moreover, the extracts used in recent research as evidence are often fairly lengthy ones, and taken from a variety of discourse types and situations even when the focus is on a single context (such as the workplace, as in Holmes and Stubbe). The extracts then provide the data for the detailed analyses and close readings which all these writers engage in. (Although Brown and Levinson also use natural language data as evidence, their extracts tend to be brief, with the emphasis on speaker utterances consisting often of

single speech acts.) The importance of analysing such extracts as situated discourse, and the crucial significance of contextual features both in the immediate and wider sense is paramount in recent work. Lastly, all these writers point to the importance of recording interactive discourse which becomes a site of ‘dispute’ or ‘struggle’ as being particularly interesting and revealing in enabling us to understand in greater depth how power is exercised and its relation to politeness.

Reference

The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics