ANALYZING BROWN AND LEVINSON'S POLITENESS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to explore the theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson in 1978. It presents the thoughts about politeness theory according to so-called experienced linguists. Furthermore, the author contributes with her own cultural examples in relation to the theory. The article discusses Brown and Levinson's special formula to calculate the weightiness of face-threatening acts which can be related to the specific religious, environmental, and gestural aspects of various speech communities.

When we analyze the category of politeness in linguistics Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness will be the main theoretical basis as they gave a clear understanding of this term. Before it is presented the intricate details of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, I must first discuss Goffman's notion of "face" as Brown and Levinson essentially rely on this notion in explaining their theory. Goffman defined face as:

"*The positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact*".

Goffman maintained that the notion of "face" (one's social image) is the basis on which the behaviors of participants in any social interaction are structured and regulated. Participants are often oriented towards what others think of them during the course of social interaction; for instance, if events establish a face that is better than what one might have expected, one is likely to "feel good". If one's ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one is likely to "feel bad". Moreover, people also have feelings toward the face sustained for other participants. Thus in order to "save face", either the face of a speaker or hearer, people usually perform *face-work*, which are forms of habitual and standardized practices, learnt by participants through socialization (the life-long process of inheriting one's society skills, social norms and customs), and are consistent with face. Goffman addressed the cultural diversity of face and observed that "each person, subculture, and society seems

to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices". Hence, an act which is considered face-threatening in one culture and needs the application of face-saving practices from the part of the speaker might not be considered as such in another culture. For example, in Uzbek and English communities, it is customary to arrive on time to a home to which one has been invited (not early or late) whereas in some cultures such as Arabian it is just a custom to be late to such kind of places. It is observed in Uzbek society that, time is as fixed and rigidly segmented as it tends to be among Uzbek people. What is more, in some cases when the guests acknowledge that they have arrived late, they tend to placate the hearer by saying *"hechqisi yo'q, marhamat kiravering, qolganlar ham hozirgina kelishdi* which is translated as: *"never mind, it doesn't matter you may come in please, just others have arrived too".*

Goffman's notion of face and its cultural diversity was intriguing to Brown and Levinson, who considered the notion of saving face as the essence of politeness and equated face-saving practices with politeness strategies. In other words, Brown and Levinson affirmed that politeness phenomena are instances of face-work, which means that ultimately concerns about one's face and the face of others is the primary justification for all instances of politeness. Like Goffman, Brown and Levinson theorized that the notion of face, which they define as *"the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself"* is vulnerable; thus, must be continually monitored by interactants during social interaction. They claimed that individuals have two types of face: positive and negative.

Positive face was defined as: *"the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others,"*

Negative face as: *"the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others"*.

Moreover, they argued that face underpinned two forms of politeness: negative politeness, which involves strategies directed at saving the negative face of a person (one's desire to freedom of action and non-imposition), whether it is the speaker's or the hearer's; and positive politeness, which involves strategies directed at saving the positive face (one's desire to be liked, admired, and related to in a positive way) of the speaker or the hearer. Negative politeness is the formal politeness that the notion "politeness" conjures up, but positive politeness is less obvious. Drawing on these basic concepts of the theory, Brown and Levinson's view on politeness has, thus, been termed "the face-saving view" by linguists, such as Fraser. Brown and Levinson further maintained that interlocutors often strive to save face when they are confronted with a face threatening act (FTA). FTAs are acts that "run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker". FTAs may threaten four types of face, the speaker's positive face (e.g. apologies, confessions, acceptance of compliments), the speaker's negative face (e.g. excuses, expression of thanks, acceptance of offers), the addressee's positive face (e.g. criticism, ridicule, disagreement), and the addressee's negative face (e.g. orders, requests, advice).

In order to save face, Brown and Levinson proposed five strategies to be employed by interlocutors for this purpose, and they outlined them on a scale ranging

from 1to 5 as follows: 1is being the least polite whereas 5is being the most polite.

1. Do the FTA on record, baldly, without redressive action e.g. *lend me money*

2. Do the FTA on record, with redressive action, using positive politeness strategies e.g. *Brother, you have a golden heart, will you please lend me some money?*

3. Do the FTA on record, with redressive action, using negative politeness strategies e.g*. Sir, sorry to disturb you, may you lend me some money?*

4. Do the FTA off record, indirectly in a way that does not commit you to the FTA e.g. give hints (*I lost my wallet*), use irony (*I always have money*), etc.).

5. Don't do the FTA is when S refrains from performing the FTA for any reason.

Moreover, in order to choose which strategy to employ, B and L claimed that speaker calculates the weightiness of the FTA based on an evaluation of three social factors namely, (P)ower, (D)istance, and (R)anking. The overall weightiness indicates the degree of the face threat that is involved in performing the FTA and is calculated using this formula:

$$Wx= D(S, H) + P(H, S) +Rx$$

Where Wx is the numerical value that measures the weightiness of the FTA x, D (S, H) is the value that measures the social distance between S and H, P (H,S) is a measure of the power that H has over S, and Rx is a value that measures the degree to which the FTA x is rated an imposition in that culture. Brown and Levinson maintained that although these social factors are universal, they vary cross-culturally in that different cultures employ different strategies for performing FTAs. As an illustration, Garcia compared the strategies which American and Venezuelan respondents employed to apologize to a friend for not having attended his party. The results showed that the American respondents used negative politeness strategies to apologize, were deferential and self-effacing to the host, and used devices to maintain social distance with the host. Venezuelans, on the other hand, offered explanations for not attending, repeated the host's words, and expressed themselves in terms of familiarity and solidarity with the host (used positive politeness approaches).It was revealed that the approach taken by the American offenders (mostly through using negative politeness strategies) left the host comfortable with the outcome. By contrast, the Venezuelan approach created disharmony between the interlocutors and miscommunication of the intended message.

In conclusion, it can be concluded that Brown and Levinson pinpointed the phenomenon of politeness as a worthwhile area of research in linguistic pragmatics, and they have clearly considered politeness phenomenon from a Gricean and speech-act theoretic point of view, giving priority to the speaker's intention, and abstracting away from the actual speaker to model persons that have individual rationality and face. One recurrent assumption that these theories have is that different cultures are homogeneous, and that they agree on what politeness is as a notion, which leads to universalizing politeness, its rules and principles. It can be understood that in linguistics, Brown and Levinson's theory remains a very useful analytical framework for speech act studies concerned with understanding and comparing politeness phenomena for which no alternative has been offered so far.

References:

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