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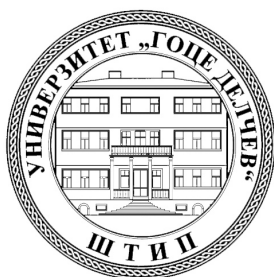
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## THE VARIABILITY OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS

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### Abstract

Politeness is a universal concept present in all languages and cultures. Despite the universality of the general concept of politeness, linguistic politeness is a different concept with its own distinct features related to both language and culture. The aim of this paper is to raise the awareness for the variability of linguistic politeness and its influence on the communicative competence of learners of English as a foreign language. The paper gives a thorough explanation on the difference between politeness as a behavioural trait and linguistic politeness by a theoretical overview of the development of linguistic politeness in English and some of the most influential linguistic approaches to this multiplex concept. Furthermore, it shows the culture-based variety of linguistic politeness in other languages and cultures and consequently emphasizes its influence on EFL learners with different cultural backgrounds and its importance for EFL teachers as well.

**Key words:** politeness, linguistic politeness, EFL, cultural variability.

### Introduction

Politeness is an intricate concept that requires a multidirectional review with a special emphasis on its relations with language and culture, which are additionally complex terms. In the Cambridge Dictionary<sup>1</sup> politeness is defined as “behaviour that is socially correct and shows understanding of and care for other people’s feelings”, and in the Oxford Dictionary<sup>2</sup> it is described as “good manners and respect for the feelings of others” and “the fact of being socially correct but not always sincere”. On one hand, these definitions perfectly summarize the view of any individual on the concept of politeness, regardless of their culture, language, or any other characteristics. On the other hand, these definitions are extremely vague since socially correct behaviour or good manners are variable terms that are dependent on a range of factors such as culture, language, ethnicity, tradition, language and many more. Moreover, politeness as a general concept and linguistic politeness are two distinct terms.

Linguistic politeness is a distinct concept that includes both language and politeness as a social behaviour or simply it can be described as “polite use of language” (Ononye, 2020, p.22). Linguistic politeness refers to the language used to express

<sup>1</sup> politeness. (2023). Cambridge Free English Dictionary. available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/politeness>

<sup>2</sup> politeness (2023) Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. (n.d.). available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/politeness?q=politeness>



politeness in accordance with the sociocultural behaviour of a certain community. The complexity of politeness is further enhanced in linguistic politeness due to its dependence on elements with large variability, but also due to the different views of linguists on the concept itself. Herein, the first step in understanding and describing the concept of politeness is to differentiate between politeness used as a general term for a certain type of behaviour versus linguistic politeness or the language used to express politeness. Furthermore, one must consider the variable views of linguists on linguistic politeness as well as the cultural variability of linguistic politeness.

### **Linguistic politeness (origins and development)**

The concept of politeness gradually changed in the past from cooperative and respectful behaviour to a polished or polite way of speaking. In Britain the polished and desired speech in the 19<sup>th</sup> century belonged to the upper classes, and through time the polite speech became equated to standard English. Therefore, this can be considered as the origin of language expressed politeness in the English language. Nowadays, the use of a standard language is still regarded as polite and appropriate in most everyday situations, not only for English, but for any language in general.

The language used to express politeness or linguistic politeness is interrelated to numerous concepts and depends on multiple features, therefore it is studied by many different researchers such as philosophers, linguists, psychologists etc. In this paper I will focus solely on the linguistic views on politeness.

The historical development of different linguistic views on politeness are nowadays referred to as classic, modern and post-modern views. The classical views on politeness are driven by one of the initial attempts to provide a framework that describes the appropriate use of English in discourse which is the Gricean cooperative principle. Grice (1969) believed that people who are involved in a conversation will naturally cooperate with each other and further proposed four basic maxims that are nowadays referred to as the Gricean maxims. In accordance with the maxims people should: provide the appropriate amount of information (quantity maxim), be truthful (quality maxim), be relevant (maxim of relevance), and avoid ambiguity or obscurity (maxim of manner). Although the Gricean maxims offer a well-structured guide for socially appropriate language use, it was shown that people often intentionally do not adhere to the maxims and convey or imply different meanings through a conversational implicature. Nevertheless, the maxims served as a solid base for future frameworks such as the politeness principle.

The politeness principle is a maxim-based approach to politeness established by Leech (1983). It is based on six maxims with variable importance, and these are the following: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy maxim. The use of maxims allows minimization of the impolite and maximization of polite beliefs. The role of this model is to maintain social equality and friendly relations to enable the speaker to assume that the interlocutor is being cooperative. Leech (2014) defined the politeness principle as “a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain or enhance communicative concord” (p.87). The constraint that he mentions is labelled as ‘general strategy of politeness’ and encompasses all its variants or maxims. Leech

emphasized that his maxims vary in different cultures and further studies are needed to describe the politeness principle in different contexts, unlike Brown and Levinson (1987) who believed in universality.

Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that politeness is the act of being aware of a person's face and respect it. Their theory is based on the concept of face introduced by Goffman (1967), who believed that every individual has a public self-image, or a face and the social interaction is always with the aim to maintain that face. He further differentiated between a positive face, or the desire to be liked and appreciated, and a negative face or the desire not to be imposed by others. Brown and Levinson agreed that the face consists of the emotional and social side of a person's self that is expected to be recognised by others. The positive face requires maintenance of the positive image, which means appreciating the wishes and desires of a person in the social context and showing that the person is liked, respected, and accepted. On the other hand, the negative face requires respecting the individual's needs for freedom of action, freedom from imposition and the right to make one's own decisions. According to the different faces, there are also different acts of politeness. If the speaker addresses the positive needs of the hearer and enhances hearer's positive face, then we have positive politeness. If the speaker addresses the above-mentioned needs of the hearer for freedom, then we have negative politeness. In each society, people generally behave in such a way that their self-image will be respected, and usually other people follow this pattern.

Opposing the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), Watts (2003) pointed out that the notion of face defined by Goffman depends on social factors, and the face wants that appear in Brown and Levinson's work are developed prior to the interaction. Herein, facework and politeness theory cannot be equated or be a basis for a new politeness model. Also, he stated that the Gricean approach to conversational cooperation is not adequate for a politeness theory. Unlike the view of Leech that puts the focus on the hearer, Watts (2003) believes that the central focus of analysis should be on the social interaction itself. Therefore, the study of politeness of Watts incorporates numerous aspects of social interaction, the polite, appropriate, and direct behaviour, as well as the impolite, inappropriate, and indirect behaviour of the interlocutors. His approach belongs to the modern views on politeness, which means the focus was no longer on the individual, but on the interpersonal relations in the interaction process.

Watts' view on politeness includes politeness, impoliteness, and politic behaviour. The term politic behaviour marks all linguistic behaviour that is seen as appropriate to the social constraints in a certain interaction. It is a socio-culturally determined behaviour that is directed toward establishing or maintaining the personal relationships between individuals or a social group. On the other hand, he defined the linguistic behaviour as the behaviour which is perceived as beyond what is expectable as polite or impolite behaviour depending on the behaviour itself (whether it relates to positive or negative politeness).

Following Eelen's (2001) views, Watts (2003) described politeness by dividing it into two groups: first - order (im)politeness and second - order (im)politeness. First order impoliteness are the lay interpretations of the concept, while the technical term

studied by linguists is labelled as second - order (im)politeness. Also, he believed that second - order (im)politeness shouldn't be analysed outside the communicative or verbal interaction, and that the focus of the analysis should be the ways in which members of a social group conceptualise (im)politeness. Politeness can be seen as both positive and showing deference. Politeness and impoliteness encompass all the strategies, whether verbal or non-verbal, that individuals use to construct and reproduce forms of cooperative social interaction across cultures. In order to set up a theory of linguistic politeness, the focus has to be on the interpersonal relations in the interaction process including the historical, cultural and social relations.

The Watt's structure of im/politeness is established upon Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice and the concept of emergent networks, which are constructed through the social links that an individual forms during a social interaction. It can be summarized that Watts' social model of im/politeness involves a dynamic model that consists of relational work between the interactants, and it involves an ongoing evaluation and characterisation of polite or impolite linguistic behaviour in social practice.

The modern views were followed by post-modern approaches on politeness that consist of variable notions. However, linguists agree that politeness doesn't reside on utterances, and it is not preconstructed. They believe politeness appears within groups, herein it can be analysed solely by analysing large stretches of interaction in a certain group. This means that despite differences in the views, all post-modern linguists share the same points of focus which are the following: study on long stretches of interaction, analysis on the context and questioning the role of the analyst. The main goal of post-modern linguists is to determine the irregularities or the patterns of politeness production in longer interactions. In order to achieve successful analysis, linguists have used different approaches. Some of the most influential were the analysis of communities of practice, the use of frames and the notion of valency.

Wenger (1998) developed the community of practice in order to capture practices within a group and to see how different communities construct norms for what is polite or impolite.

Terkourafi (2005) used frames based on the belief that past experiences set up a frame for the present norms about what linguistic expression should a speaker use. Terkourafi (2005) defines politeness as a matter of habits since politeness doesn't reside in linguistic expressions themselves, but in the regularity of their co-occurrence. Geyer (2008) also uses frames as a set of expectations which rests on previous experience.

Post-modernism can be described as a view that opposes all theories that aim toward universalism or any kind of generalisations. The individual variability in the production and perception of politeness is highly emphasized. As Locher (2006) states, the norms of politeness and impoliteness are constantly changing and are different in every social interaction. Therefore, only the interactants who are part of a group in a discourse can make a distinction of polite and impolite sayings in a particular interaction. Also, Kadar (2017) described politeness as a social action, which embodies a social group's practice and referred to politeness as "an interactionally co-constructed phenomenon". Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the variability

of the approaches, they all strive toward the same notion that both politeness and impoliteness are the ends of one continuum and speech utterances can be closer to one of them but cannot be divided in two strictly separate categories.

### **Politeness in other cultures**

The review on multiple politeness theories and approaches may give the illusion that it is a well studied universal concept. However, most of the linguistic work in this field focuses on the English language, while less research is available concerning other languages and cultures. This aspect of politeness might be even the most important since English is very often used as a second or a foreign language; therefore, native culture has a great influence on how speakers express themselves in English and how they both convey and comprehend linguistic politeness.

Macedonian culture shows preference toward positive politeness that values solidarity and friendship. The Macedonian speech is usually filled with markers of solidarity that show closeness, involvement and friendship as suggested by Kusevska (2012). It is convenient to express your feelings and being direct is equated to being close. Macedonian speakers value the sense for belonging and employ more polite language to members of their group (close friends, parents...) and to people with higher status, than to people outside of their group. Another culture that values closeness and in-group belonging is the Bulgarian culture. As Hristov (2008) confirms Bulgarian is a language oriented toward positive politeness. However, he emphasizes that it is closer to positive politeness on the positive-negative politeness continuum and there are still exceptions, and negative politeness might also appear in speech.

Cultures that show greater difference concerning the concept of politeness are the Asian cultures, which are highly hierarchical, emphasise harmony and avoid face threatening acts.

The notion of 'face' is present in Chinese, but its definition shows the difference between the Eastern and Western linguistics and culture. In Chinese culture there's great emphasis of the 'face' as a normative social phenomenon. Mao (1994) claims that face encodes a reputable image that individuals can claim for themselves as they interact with others in a given community. Gu (1990) suggests 'face' is something belonging to society rather than to the individual and claims that the politeness principle is regarded as "sanctioned belief that an individual's behaviour ought to live up to the expectations of respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement" (p.239). Gu (1990) proposes a 'balance principle' and mentions four maxims: self-denigration, address, tact and generosity. The balance principle's function is to maintain social equilibrium. In summary Chinese conception of politeness features: modesty, respectfulness, warmth, and refinement. Politeness is seen as a norm imposed by social convention and a means to achieve good interpersonal relations.

In Japanese interactants must always explicitly show in their language how they view the social relationship, therefore the notion of face is also present. Matsumoto (1989) explains that the presentation of face is intimately bound up with showing recognition of ones' relative position in the communicative context and with the maintenance of the social ranking order. As Ide (1989) explains, there is a distinction between two kinds of politeness: volition and discernment. Volitional politeness

is motivated by an individual's wants, while discernment concerns the role and obligations of the individual as member of a closely knit group within hierarchical society. Herein, the feature of Japanese that differentiates it from English and other languages is the 'group face'. In Japanese culture and language, the concern for the group is the expected norm of behaviour, rather than the atomistic individualism.

### **Conclusion**

The various linguistic theories and principles of politeness and the different cultural habits on polite or impolite language expression simply confirm the complexity and variability of the concept of politeness (and impoliteness). It also emphasizes the importance of teaching and learning this pragmatic concept in EFL and ESL groups. One of the actions that can be immediately taken is to raise awareness of the importance and significance of linguistic politeness for learners and teachers of English, and consequently to incorporate it appropriately in the teaching programmes regardless of the level of English that is taught or the age of the students/learners. In this case, I firmly believe that explicit explanation of politeness and impoliteness should be applied in the English teaching together with an explanation on socio-cultural differences. Only in this way, teachers will be able to help students achieve real communicative fluency in English and although it cannot fully prevent future ambiguities, I believe it can significantly decrease miscommunication in relation to polite and impolite expressions especially for students of English as a foreign language with different cultural backgrounds.

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