

An Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Non-Goal Oriented Conversation

日常会話におけるポライトネスストラテジーの分析

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the use of politeness strategies, both positive and negative, in casual conversation. Brown and Levinson's classic framework, which concentrated on the analysis of these strategies in goal oriented conversations, will be discussed. A detailed analysis of a non-goal oriented interaction is presented, with a view to further developing the framework to include casual conversations.

Keywords : Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies, face threatening act, casual conversation

1. Introduction

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was first published in 1978 and was considerably extended and expanded in their 1987 work *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. This framework of politeness phenomena used as a starting point Goffman's theory of face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (Goffman, 1955:213). Brown and Levinson further developed this theory of face with the assertion that all interlocutors are concerned with maintaining their "positive face: the positive, consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants" (Brown & Levinson, 1987:61) and with maintaining their "negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves [and] rights to non-distraction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987:61). The theory asserts that any goal-oriented interaction can incorporate a threat to face for interactants and thus politeness strategies of a dual nature – positive politeness strategies and negative

politeness strategies – can be employed to either minimise a face-threatening act (hereafter, FTA) or to allow the interactants to maintain their notion of face even when an FTA has not occurred.

Brown and Levinson's work details this theory and gives a variety of examples of both positive and negative politeness strategies in English, Tamil and Tzeltal, most of which consist of utterances designed to communicate a clear, pre-determined goal, such as borrowing money or apologising. The work also asserts that, despite the seemingly vast variety of linguistic and behavioural differences between cultures, there are a number of human politeness strategies employed by speakers of all languages, neatly illustrated in the title of the work: *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* and further described as "the extraordinary parallelism in the linguistic minutiae of the utterances with which persons choose to express themselves in quite unrelated languages and cultures." (Brown and Levinson, 1987:55)

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This work expanded the linguistic perception of politeness and has been widely cited in academia. How-

ever, it is not without its critics. The idea of the universality of politeness strategies has been questioned by researchers working in Asian languages (Matsumoto 1988; Ide 1989) who suggest that in languages such as Japanese, politeness is less a self-selected strategy and more a social register, making use of “conventionalised expressions showing deference” (Matsumoto, 1988:409)

Furthermore, the authors tend to be sweeping in their cultural generalisations, particularly, for example, where they separate positive and negative politeness cultures into categories such as “the friendly, backslapping cultures” and “those lands of standoffish creatures” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 245). In his 2003 work, *Politeness*, Richard Watts challenges the framework and introduces a more conceptual distinction between politeness and impoliteness, involving the idea that it is conceptualised differently from culture to culture and, indeed, from individual to individual within each culture. Further to this, he asserts that there are no inherently polite utterances, only those which are perceived as polite or impolite by the listener, thus taking a more holistic approach to empirical data. In his view, the role of the listener is key in the perception of the exchange.

The application of politeness strategies only in goal-oriented interactions is also questioned in other literature (Kitamura, 2000). Although Brown and Levinson used a limited type of interaction to illustrate how interlocutors employ these positive and negative politeness strategies, it could be argued that the strategies are also present in non-goal oriented interactions i.e. casual conversations. According to Kitamura, Brown and Levinson “tend to ignore the fact that most single utterances are actually just constituents of a larger exchange” and “ignore any interaction, such as simply enjoying a casual conversation, which does not involve a predetermined goal” (Kitamura 2000:2) Thus, could it be argued that, as Matsumoto asserts for the Japanese language, politeness strategies in English are less about face-saving or face-maintaining and

more about social norms and register when employed in casual conversation?

In this paper, an example of casual conversation has been analysed to show the use of politeness strategies in a non-goal oriented discussion. In this conversation, a number of strategies are employed to establish the roles within the exchange, to encourage and sympathise and, at one stage, to deflect and recover from a potential threat to positive face. Most of the politeness strategies detailed here are positive strategies, probably due to the friendly nature of the relationship, and therefore the lack of social distance, between the interactants and they are used in order to satisfy positive face. It can also be argued that the listeners’ politeness strategies also make a vital contribution to the development of the exchange.

2. The data

The segment transcribed in this paper is part of a longer conversation which was approximately two and a half hours in length. Of that two and a half hours, 26 minutes were recorded and a segment lasting two minutes and 13 seconds is transcribed here.

The equipment used for collection was a digital voice recorder.

3. The participants

The three participants are all female, native speakers of English. K. and L. are both from the USA; M. is from the UK. They are all in their thirties and regard themselves as friends.

4. The conversation

Speaker K. gives details of her recent trip to Thailand and Cambodia, during which she was ill for some of the holiday. M. provides prompt questions, neutral fillers and continuers for much of the conversation, as K. establishes herself as the principal speaker. When L. interjects with an FTA against K.’s positive face, the conversation becomes more inclusive of the three participants.

5. Analysis of the conversation

- 1 M I haven't seen you since...before Christmas
 2 K Yeah, it's been forever
 3 M How was your holiday? Thailand, //wasn't it?
 4 K //Thailand and Cambodia, yeah, mostly Cambodia
 5 Uh, it was OK.
 6 M Only OK?
 7 K Half was good and half was not so good because..um..OK, so the first
 8 half, Bangkok for two days and then Siem Reap and Angkor Wat for
 9 four...four...
 10 M Mhm
 11 K four and a half, I guess
 12 M Right
 13 K and then, um, I developed food poisoning
 14 M Oh NO
 15 K or some issue, I'm assuming it was food poisoning or something from
 16 the water, I don't really know for sure but that was like the day that we
 17 left Siem Reap
 18 M Yeah
 19 K I had this like horrendous eight-hour boat ride on top of a boat in the
 20 blistering sun and then, um, I started feeling like shit a few hours later
 21 after we arrived at this town we were going to and I ended up with food
 22 poisoning or something
 23 M Oh my god
 24 K It was bad for – I had that for a couple of days and then I just felt sick
 25 on and off for the rest of the trip, it was like a week

In lines 1 - 6, M. reminds K. that they haven't met for a long time and K. agrees with an exaggerated overstatement: "...it's been forever" to establish solidarity. M. enquires about the holiday and looks for confirmation of the destination with a tag question: "Thailand, wasn't it?" as an indication that she remembers K.'s plans. K. issues a token agreement with a mild correction: "...mostly Cambodia, yeah" and delivers her verdict on the holiday. M. encourages her to expand.

From lines 7 – 25, K. establishes herself as the principal speaker. She speaks slowly with a number of pauses and fillers, thus inviting M. and L. to contribute in the conversation. M. uses these pauses to insert neutral encouragement to continue but neither M. or L. interrupt or seize the conversational baton in any way which would take the role of principal from K., until K. reaches the important point of her story,

the food poisoning event, where M. inserts expressions of sympathy: "oh NO" "oh my god" . As K.'s story gathers speed and she established herself as the principal speaker, she begins to details the story in longer chunks, as in lines 19-22. She also uses exaggerated adjectives to engage the listeners: note her use of 'horrendous', 'blistering' and 'feeling like shit', all examples of positive politeness strategies designed to intensify the listeners' interest in the story, making their attention worthwhile.

This exchange provided good examples of both positive and negative politeness phenomena. Positive strategies mean that K. and M. are both showing their mutual investment in this conversation as an act of satisfying each other's positive face. K. creates opportunities for the others to engage, by speaking slowly and pausing at phrasal boundaries. M. accepts these opportunities and shows her investment in the exchange.

A negative politeness strategy displayed here is the lack of intrusion or imposition made by K. and M. As K. creates these pauses and boundaries in conversation, she is also seeking approval to continue. Had

there been no encouragement, the topic of the conversation would doubtlessly have changed to something more inclusive. However, M. encourages K. to continue, all the while using only minimal responses so as not to derail K.'s story.

- 26 M Food poisoning really wipes you out
 27 K Yeah
 28 M You think that once you've got over the initial, like, symptoms//
 29 K //yeah
 30 M You're gonna be OK but it really does, like, drain your energy
 31 K It does and, um, I have stomach issues // anyway
 32 M //oh that's right
 33 K So...probably just exacerbated everything but...um...it wasn't as bad
 34 as, like, I got it in India a couple of years ago and that was...I
 35 couldn't get out of bed//
 36 M //yeah?
 37 K it was SO bad

Between lines 26 – 30, M. more fully expresses sympathy and understanding for K.'s illness and K. resumes the role of principal with a reminder of a recurrent stomach problem. Here, M. interjects with an utterance designed to show K. that she is aware of her [K.'s] problem and K. continues with a brief mention of a previous, worse, bout of illness on another holiday.

M. takes this opportunity to express a shared understanding of the illness as a strategy which satisfies K.'s positive face. K. responds to this display of shared understanding by acknowledging and agreeing with M.'s experience of food poisoning in line 30: "it does..."

In lines 31 -32, here is another example of a politeness strategy designed to satisfy K.'s positive face. We can understand from M.'s response that K. has spoken of her stomach problem in a previous conversation. This response is an act of sympathy and reassurance that K.'s health concerns have not been forgotten by her friends.

So far, L. has remained remarkably silent. She has not issued any of the type of encouragement or con-

tinuers that M. has in this conversation. This reticence raises some questions about an individual's views on politeness in conversation. Could it be that L. regards her silence as a politeness strategy in itself – she does not want to interrupt or otherwise derail K.'s conversation? Does her silence indicate rudeness? On this, Brown and Levinson wrote: 'politeness has to be communicated, and the absence of politeness, may, *ceteris paribus*, be taken as the absence of a polite attitude' (Brown and Levinson, 1987:5). Pfister suggests that the operative word is 'communication' and offers the following hypothesis about impoliteness: 'An utterance is impolite if and only if there is an implicature of the content "I intend to be impolite" or "I'm being impolite here because I'm insensitive to your face needs" .' (Pfister, 2009: 3) In the case of L.'s silence, it is doubtful (but not clear) if there were any intention to be impolite in this situation.

Another, more mundane, explanation for L.'s silence could be that, as this segment of the conversation is taken from the beginning of the recording, she was at first self-conscious of the recording device! However, in the next segment of the conversation, L. joins in and becomes more active in the exchange.

- 38 L That's why I don't travel
 39 K You can travel! //like...
 40 L //Meh, it's OK, really!
 41 K I've been on so many trips, I think this is the second time something has
 42 ever happened to me and this one wasn't..in the scheme of things it
 43 wasn't that bad
 44 L Everybody I hear from, it seems, that goes to South East Asia {sic} gets
 45 some kind of flu bug...or//...stomach bug
 46 K //mmm
 47 L or gets sick in some way
 48 K It's inevitable

Between lines 38 – 48, L. enters the conversation, having previously been listening in silence. She interjects with an utterance that could be described as a face threatening act: “that's why I don't travel” . This could be regarded as a threat to K.'s positive face, the image that K. has of herself as a seasoned traveller, one who takes minor illnesses in her stride. L. seems to express her disapproval or to perhaps suggest that K. is misguided to travel to such countries. K. responds by defending herself, downplaying the instances of illness as having been very few compared to the amount

of travelling she has undertaken. L. then backpedals a little in her approach by softening her opinion with weakeners: “...it seems...” “...some kind of...” “...in some way...” in order to, as Brown and Levinson assert: “make one's opinion safely vague” (1987:116) and K. supports her with an utterance of agreement in line 48: “it's inevitable” although her previous defence doesn't seem like she agrees that illness is inevitable when travelling in Asia. This exchange seems to show a willingness by both interactants to become cooperative, a positive politeness strategy in itself.

- 49 M So that was – how long were you away?
 50 K Two and a half weeks
 51 M Yeah?
 52 K So that was like almost half the trip, the last half of the trip, I felt...
 53 M ...shitty?
 54 K No KIDDING...but, like, Cambodia's like...the country is amazing or
 55 Angkor Wat, rather, all the temples and stuff, we saw temples for
 56 three days and that was just so amazing. I highly recommend it.
 57 M Projectile vomiting aside?
 58 K Yeah [laughs] that was all part of the experience too!

In lines 49 – 58, the final part of the conversation, M. steers the conversation away from L.'s FTA and allows the conversation to resume by asking K. another question. In line 52, K. does not finish her sentence but M. finishes it for her: “...I felt...” “...shitty?” as a strategy designed to show her [M.'s] understanding. K. responds with a fairly emphatic agreement of M.'s assessment. Here, M. finishes K.'s sentence as an effort not only to show empathy but also to show her engagement in the story so far. This is another attempt

to satisfy K.'s positive face. K.'s response also satisfies M.'s positive face – she roundly agrees with M.'s summary of the situation.

M.'s sentence finishing is also a repetition of the only other example of swearing in the conversation (Line 20: “I started feeling like shit...”) In this case, it could be argued that the use of expletives is an act of positive politeness, designed to show awareness of the strength of the relationship in that it can withstand an

impolite utterance. M. also seems to echo K.'s chosen expletive to show empathy.

M. also uses a joke to respond to K.'s recommendation of the trip to Cambodia: "Projectile vomiting aside?" as a means of conveying that the interactants are co-operators in the conversation. Joking operates as a basic positive politeness strategy, largely employed to put the hearer at ease but, in this case, has a further function of assuring K. that M. has been listening and understanding the story. K. agrees in another act of conversational co-operation.

6. Conclusion

Casual conversation has a number of meaningful aspects: the choice of topic, the method and order of speaking and listening, the selected utterances and their organisation - all these aspects include politeness phenomena. As the act of conversation involves a complicated 'dance' of satisfying positive and negative face wants of all the interactants, there seems to be considerable overlap in various patterns of positive politeness and negative politeness strategies and these strategies are not as clearly separable in casual conversation than as was suggested in the goal-oriented examples described in Brown and Levinson's work. This paper, of course, looks at only one example of casual conversation between three friends. Further research could involve the analysis of casual conversations of

smaller or larger groups and of groups where social distance is less (e.g. family members) or greater (e.g. work colleagues). Further work could also look at the committing of face threatening acts within casual conversations between friends to investigate the use of politeness strategies to diffuse or resolve the conflict.

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Transcription conventions used

//	Overlapping utterances
...	Hesitation
	False starts/rethinking
[]	Non-verbal information
capitals	Emphatic syllables

Full transcript

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