

Linguistics Politeness

A Research Paper

By Asst. Instr. Fatimah Sabri Al-Shiraida

Department of English

AlTurath University College

Abstract

This research study aims at exploring the role and the effect of linguistic politeness on everyday communications and to explain the power and effectiveness of linguistic politeness in requesting speech among human beings, especially in cross-cultural communications which affect the linguistic competence of foreign language learners. The first part of the study is the introduction which consists of the objectives of the study and the hypothesis. The second part deals with the past studies which are related to the phenomenon of linguistic politeness. The third part reveals the findings of the study, which show the effects of linguistic politeness on human conversation and the types of linguistic politeness forms in different cultures and the conclusions which refer to the importance of including politeness forms in foreign language textbooks.

I. Introduction

This research paper deals with an important issue which has an effect on learning any foreign language, especially on the spoken performance of the foreign language learners and on the outcome of the educational operation as a whole. It aims at exploring the role of politeness in the social interactions, which affect the relationship among human beings and which appear in everyday conversations. Its importance in cross-cultural communication is obvious and must be regarded as a vital phenomenon in the era of growing globalization. Humans usually try to be polite to one another in their speech “as politeness can affect the structure of the conversations, (Jean Aitchison, 1972: 104). Therefore, politeness can play a vital role in everyday human life. Politeness is culturally determined (Janet Holmes, 2008: 159). In other words, different speech communities emphasize different functions and express particular functions differently. How should one refuse an invitation politely? How does one express gratitude for a meal in another culture? How should one greet people in different speech community? These are examples of cross-cultural differences in the expressions of speech functions which should be mastered by the foreign language learners. (Sifianou, 1992) found that British English speakers conceptualize politeness as follows: consideration of other people’s feelings by conforming to social norms include the use of standard forms

such as *please* and *sorry* in appropriate situations, requests rather than demands for people to do things for you and the display of 'good manners.' Politeness was associated with (a) being friendly, approachable, kind and attentive, (b) respect and consideration, (c) appropriate use of language, and (d) being modest, indirect and humble. Murphy and Levy (2006: 4) found Australian English speakers believe that *politeness* is expressed in the following ways: showing formality, use of correct titles, greater use of please and thank you, use of formal greetings and closings, offering assistance for further queries, offering friendly greetings generally, use of careful wording and use of respectful endings.

2-Avoidance of Directness

One of the features of polite speech is the avoidance of directness especially when posing a command or request. If someone asks someone else to close a window, he may use a very direct way as to say: (close that window.) which is considered as an impolite way and it may be used by young people only. Another way of dealing with this request is to say it in an indirect way which is considered as a polite way, as in: (I wonder whether you can close that window.) This feature may be a universal in spite of cultural different strategies "Humans everywhere tend to be polite in similar ways" (Jean Aitchinson, 1972: 105). During the last decades, many researches have been conducted, some researches on linguistic politeness as it becomes the heart essential feature in everyday human social conversations. The term "politeness" does not only rely on the protocol behavior of human interaction in a social setting, but it also becomes as a connecting relationship between the language use and the social context. "Politeness norms help to explain some of what happens when people of different cultural backgrounds talk to each other" (Fasold & Linton, 2006: 39). In addition, humans usually try to be more polite and that is reflected in their speech. Humans everywhere tend to be in similar ways, based on two basic social requirements: 'No criticism' and 'No interference'. Humans want to be approved of and they do not want to be imposed upon. According to (Aitchison, 2003: 105), "Politeness can radically affect the structure of the conversations" and it plays an important role in everyday communication, as communication is one way to convey meaning intention and messages. It is also a process of transferring information from one person to another. Therefore, when speaking a foreign language one must know how to deal with other

people's culture and must have awareness to choose the right form which conveys the intended message. One must be aware of the differences between his native language and the foreign language, especially those which are related to the different culture. Lakoff (1973: 303) pointed that "what is polite for me may be rude for you."

3-Definitions of Politeness

Politeness has been defined by Leech (1983: 82) as conflict avoidance. He views politeness function as "to maintain the social equilibrium and friendly relations which enable to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place. Lakoff (1990: 34) interprets linguistic politeness as, "a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange.

4-Markers of Politeness

A person needs to be polite during communication with people, and therefore he must be able to choose polite expressions used in the language used to make the addressee feel comfortable. Politeness can be expressed in type of words, vocabulary as well as grammar. In a formal speech there will be a need to be more polite than in an informal speech. British people, for example, use the word (thou) instead of (you) in formal speech. French people use the word (vous) instead of the (tu) for the pronoun (you) in formal speech in order to show politeness.

5-Politeness and Teaching

Politeness is also important in the field of teaching. The conversation between the teacher and the students will be formal of some sort. The students should choose the appropriate forms in their conversation with their teacher, different from that used among the students themselves. They avoid using slang words and direct requests. According to (Richard Watts, 2003: 19), politeness is not something we are born with, but something we have to learn and be socialized into. Politeness is a universal phenomenon of social interaction, particularly of verbal interaction.

6--Questions to Be Answered

The current study is trying to find answers to the following questions:

1-How does linguistic politeness affect the communicative competence of a second Language learning?

2 -What role does linguistic politeness play in social interactions?

7-Objectives of the Research

- 1-The current research explains the effect of linguistic politeness on the communicative competence of the foreign language learners.**
- 2- The current research tries to explore the role of linguistic politeness in social interactions.**

II. Past Studies Related to Linguistic Politeness

This part of the study deals with the following previous research studies, which highlight some issues related to linguistic politeness. This literature review will be divided into two sections, the first section deals with the effect of politeness on approaching the teaching of communicative competence in second/foreign language. The second section explains the power and the effectiveness of linguistic politeness in requesting speech.

(1) The Effect of Politeness in Communicative Competence in ESL/EFL

A Journal article written by LoCastro (1997) entitled “Politeness and Pragmatic Competence in Foreign Language Education”, *International Christian University* tries to demonstrate that language politeness is an international issue and it is a socio pragmatic phenomenon used in all languages as an interpersonal discourse. The writer dealt with the following questions: (1) Does the idea that one does not have to be polite in English provide a rationalization for the behavior, giving speakers/learners the license not to speak with politeness? And (2) Does this idea influence the lack of attention to pragmatic competence development within the educational system? The writer focuses on the ‘politeness markers’ in the speech acts of the Japanese learners and speakers of English, such as requests, apologies, agreements/disagreements, corrections, compliments, giving embarrassing information in which he compared the perceptions of Japanese EFL students in Japan and in the USA. He found that “Japanese students in the USA have perceptions of politeness more alike to those of American students than those in Japan. Suggesting that residence in the target language community results in changes in perception.” Tanaka’s (1988: 43) shows that the Japanese used more negative politeness strategies than Australian in their speech and were unable to shift their speech style in their conversations.

It may be suggested that the students' textbooks lack the occurrence of linguistic forms of politeness (LoCastro, 1997: 23), which is considered the reason for the majority of the students' usages of negative politeness. He adds that the occurrence of polite forms such as "please," "thank you" or "you're welcome".are recommended to be used by the teachers of languages .The teachers should use some supplementary materials or co-teaching materials with native assistant teachers in their classes. The findings of the study show that: (1) politeness is a universal phenomenon (2) the textbooks used do not enrich youngest learners with appropriate exposure of politeness, (3)second source input is very important for acquiring the second language, and (4) for pragmatic competence, "appropriate use of politeness markers may be constrained by learners' development stages" (LoCastro, 1997: 53). Kasper and Schmidt (1996: 160) state that "pragmatic competence is an area of communicative competence which is closely tied to cognitive ability and social experience."

Pichastor and Anglesa (2006: 57) refer to the importance of politeness in their article entitled "politeness and textbooks: how to approach the teaching of communicative competence in a second language." This study is an attempt to explain the meaning of language politeness and where to place it within the communication. There are two types of politeness; 'positive politeness' and 'negative politeness' as suggested by (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 33) which show the intimacy between the speaker and the hearer. The important issue which has been dealt with in this study is whether politeness strategies which are presented in a contextualized manner make the learners aware of the different pragmatic parameters. The study dealt with Spanish learners of English. Data textbooks of English and Spanish have been focusing on the speech acts of request and apologies in the two languages as examples of the complexity of politeness and what strategies appear and how they are presented and whether they are effective or not. Politeness strategies are culturally bound, therefore what seems appropriate in one language may not be appropriate in another. To explore politeness strategies in the two cultures; English and Spanish a purposeful sampling of university students has been exposed to situations which require different apologies. They are asked the following question; "would apologies in your first language be different from the ones recorded?". In this way, they could

compare the strategies used by their own language and the ones used in the second language. The conclusions of this study showed that the teaching of politeness strategies is to be presented in syllabus to enable the foreign language learners communicate effectively in social situations. Understanding pragmatics is complex, but the prize for understanding it is to lessen the real damage that can be done through pragmatic misunderstanding.

In their research article entitled “politeness from Routledge encyclopedia of language and learning” (Taylor & Francis, 2009: 107) point out that linguistic politeness is defined as “language usage which enables smooth communication between conversational participants according to the norms of social interaction in a particular contextual situation within a given speech community.” It is associated with indirectness in speech act. These studies point to the universal concept of politeness results in pragmatic concerns to realize particular speech acts according to suitable levels of formality with regard to participants, situation, and extent of imposition. The conclusion of this study is crucial for language learners to be made aware of the usage of politeness in textbooks to minimize the likelihood of cross-cultural misunderstandings and to avoid incorrect judgments being formed concerning their communicative intent. This should receive significant attention in the teaching of foreign languages. The article refers to the revised version of (Level, T., 1990: 282) which deals with a section on politeness conventions due to their significance in the acquisition of socio-cultural competence.

Beeching (2002: 104) refers to a module prepared for the undergraduates at the University of the West of England. This module is called ‘Language in Society’ which aims to raise intercultural communication problems which involve conventions of politeness to prepare those students for their second year abroad. The author refers to the importance of making the learners of foreign languages aware of the sensitive nature of the conventions of politeness and the importance of observing customs in the particular contexts in which they conduct their social and work lives in the foreign culture. A conclusion of this project reveals that most students have a feel for this from their native language but some do not.

Hummert, M. (2011: 195) attempts to extend “the study of politeness in context” done by Okamoto & Robinson (1997), to a consideration of

how elder peoples respond to advice delivered in patronizing (impolite) or affirming (polite) manner. The study consists of 40 older adults and the collected data are done by questionnaire. The researcher has conducted two studies concerning this topic. The first study involves older people in focus groups, regarding contexts of perceptions and responses to patronizing advice. In the second study the data collection is based on oral responses of different older participants in a (advice style: patronizing/affirming)'and (context: community/hospital)' design. The results of 'study 1' shows that politeness is "central to the concept of patronizing communication" (Hummerts, 2001). Patronizing affects the recipients' positive face, causing them to feel devalued as persons. The results of 'study 2' shows that participants of all ages have some similarity in their responses to the situational requires in community, and older participants are less likely than younger ones to view a patronizing style as appropriate in any setting. The comments of the focus group participants in study 1 are consistent with these views: "They identified the nursing home context as a possible cause of patronizing talk unacceptable in any setting". The results support the "politeness-in-interaction hypothesis" that is conducted on study 2, even they also show unanticipated complexities behaviors in a way of "politeness-In-interaction" in the responses to the advice.

(2) The Power of Linguistic Politeness in Linguistics

The role of politeness in the speech act of request as a pragmatic phenomenon of linguistic politeness which is motivated by its integral part to play in human interaction. (Cutting, 2002: 187 & Kramsch, 1993: 20). The writers refer to the belief that every utterance produced by a human depicts the degree of the social relation between the interlocutors.' Therefore, linguistic politeness is a social construct which indicates the power relation between the interlocutors. Fairclough (1989) mentions that "power is something hidden in a face-to-face discourse" (54), and he asserts that there is a close relation between requests and power in that "the right to request someone to do something often derives from having power". The aim of this qualitative study is to discover the characteristics of the Indonesian EFL learners' request realization and to improve practitioners in Indonesia concerning the importance of pragmatic competence that can be initiated, maintained, and perfected in

the classroom. The conclusion of this study is that (the most powerful request is the most polite one).

In their entitled “polite request strategies by male speakers of Yemeni Arabic in male-male interaction and male-female interaction”, in University Sains Malaysia, Al-Marrani & Sazalie (2010) investigate the “linguistics strategies” used by Arabic Yemeni native speakers in making requests. Participants of the study include 168 male and 168 female of university students. The discourse completion test is used for data collection. The data which include requests are classified into three levels; “direct strategies”, “conventionally indirect strategies,” and “non-conventionally indirect strategies”. The findings of the study show that the use of direct strategies (less polite) is used by male-male interactions while there is a trend of using high level of indirectness (more polite) by male-female interactions, and this could be attributed to culture and religious values and to show respect to women.

Holmes (2000) aims to analyze the features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a socio-linguistic perspective, and to explore the practical implications range of New Zealand workplaces. He shows humor is considered positive politeness. It can function as positive politeness strategy expressing solidarity. A successful way to indicate humor is when the speaker shares a common view with others about what is amusing and maintaining solidarity. The conclusions of this study show that “humor is always intended to be amusing. It may also serve a range of more complex functions in the workplace” (Holmes, 2000: 159). Humor is sensitively an expression to participants’ face needs. It is a dynamic means of expressing solidarity, and an effective strategy for reducing potential offense.

Schmidt (1987: 2) explores the kinds of politeness strategies; ‘positive politeness’, ‘negative politeness’ and ‘off the record’ strategies. Specifically, positive politeness represent language function such as (notice hearer’s interest, needs, want) or (exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy), (seek agreement) or (avoid agreement) etc. Negative politeness represents other language functions such as; (minimize the imposition), (give deference), (apologizing) etc. Off-record strategies include; hints as in (It is very hot here) may imply “switch on the air condition”. The author concludes that the distinction between the strategies of politeness shows differences among different classes as well

as individual differences. The study suspects that in most cultures, women to women speech interaction tends to use more positive politeness strategies than do men among men. The reviewer claims that Brown & Levinson's model and taxonomy of strategies will be useful for language teaching in three ways: "(1) A framework for cross-cultural comparison, (2) A framework for describing and assessing the communicative competence of non-speakers of languages, and (3) A practical catalogue of English politeness mechanisms" (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 33).

III. Conclusion

The linguistic phenomenon (politeness) can affect foreign language learners' competence and causes misunderstanding. Therefore, foreign language textbooks should contain politeness forms and the learners should have an awareness of these forms to avoid misunderstanding. This point of view is agreed upon by nearly all the studies concerning politeness. In spite of the above mentioned studies, it seems that this phenomenon needs further studies to explore its functions in everyday communication as human language has so many functions (e.g.: asking information, asking help, asking direction, asking for permission, inviting people, ordering and greeting) where politeness is part of it. The previous studies have dealt with few language functions such as requesting and argument. As long as there is the tendency nowadays to conduct studies concerning the global or universal language, The question to be posed in this respect is to be made as follows :Can politeness forms be universal (i.e. Useable by all humans ?)

References

- Aitchison, J. (2003). *Linguistics: teach yourself* (6th ed.). London., [England: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Al-Marrani, Y. M. & Sazalie, A. B. (2010). Polite request strategies by male speakers of Yemeni Arabic in male-male interaction and male-female interaction. *The international journal of language society and culture*. Retrieved from <http://www.educ.utas.edu.au/users/tle/JOURNAL/issues/2010/30-6.pdf>
- Beeching, K. (2002). *Politeness, subject centre for languages, linguistics and area studies*. Retrieved 11 June 2011, from <http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg/695> .

- Brown, p. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bumela, L. (2009). Requestive speech acts realizations in EFL context. In title book of *linguistics politeness in the speech act of request: A cross sectional study of Indonesian EFL learners* (chapter two, p.6). Digital Dissertation Retrieved from http://repository.upi.edu/operator/upload/t_bing_0704756_chapter2.pdf
- Cutting, J. (2002). *Pragmatics and discourse: a resource book for students*, routledge, *Routledge English Language Introductions*. Retrieved from <http://linguistlist.org/issues/14/14-1015.html>
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Holms, J. (1984). Modifying illocutionary force: *journal of pragmatics*.8(3), 65-345.
- Holms, J. (2000). *Politeness, power and provocation: how humour functions in the two workplace*. *Discourse studies*, 2(2), 159-185. doi: 10.1177/146144560002002002.
- Humment, M. L. (2001). Older adults' responses to patronizing advice balancing politeness and identity in context. *Journal of Language and social psychology*, 20 (1), 168-196. doi: 10.1177/0261927X01020001008.
- Kasper, G. & Schmidt, R. (1996). Developmental issues in inter language pragmatics. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 18 (2), 70-149.
- Kitao, K., Kathleen, Y. S. & Yoshida, H. (1987). An exploratory study of differences between politeness strategies used in requests by Americans & Japanese ERIC document reproduction service No. ED. 284-426.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Laplante, D. & Ambady, N. (2003). On how things are said voice tone, voice intensity, verbal content, and perceptions of politeness. *Journal of language and social psychology*, 22(4), 434-441. doi: 10.1177/0261927x03258084.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- LoCastro, V. (1997). Politeness and pragmatic competence in foreign language education. *Language teaching research*, 1 (3), 239-269. doi: 10.1177/136216889700100304.
- Millar, F. E., & Rogers, L. E. (1987). Relational dimensions of interpersonal dynamics. In M. E. Roloff & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Interpersonal processes*.117-139. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fraser, B., & Nolen, W. (1981).The association of deference with linguistic form. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 27,93-111.
- Okamoto, S., & Robinson, W. P. (1997). Determinants of gratitude expressions in England. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16, 411-433.
- Pichastor, S. M. & Anglesa, F. (2006). *Politeness and text books: how to approach the teaching of communicative competence in a second language*. Universitat Jaume.I. Retrieved from <http://www.uji.es/bin/publ/edicions/jfi2/politen.pdf>
- Schmidt, R. W. (1978). *Questions and politeness: strategies in social interaction*. Cambridge papers in social anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Tannen, D. (2006). Language and culture; politeness and interaction. In Fasold, R. W. & Linton J. C. (Eds.), *An introduction to language and linguistics* (p.343) . New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tanaka, N. (1988). Politeness: some problems for Japanese speakers of English. *JALT Journal*, 9, 81-102.
- Taylor & Francis (2009). Politeness . *Routledge Encyclopedia of Language Teaching and Learning*. ISBN: 0-203-21930-9 . Retrieved from http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/politeness-5-tf/#bro_copy
- Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

التأدب اللغوي

م.م. فاطمة صبري الشريدة

قسم اللغة الانكليزية - كلية التراث الجامعة

خلاصة البحث :

يهدف هذا البحث الى توضيح دور ووظائف العبارات التهذيبة في تعلم اللغات الاجنبية حيث ان اختلاف هذه العبارات هي ظاهرة اجتماعية تختلف باختلاف المجتمعات اللغوية عند الطالبات. الجزء الاول (المقدمة) يتضمن تعريف التهذيب اللغوي ومؤثراته وكذلك اهمية هذه العبارات عند تدريس اللغات الاجنبية. الجزء الثاني يتضمن بعض الدراسات السابقة التي تخص نفس الموضوع. الجزء الثالث يشمل النتائج التي تبين دور عبارات التهذيب في تعلم اللغات الاجنبية كون هذه العبارات تؤثر على الكفائه اللغوية لمتعلميها.