

Notes on Politeness



Chapter 3

'Face' and Politeness

❖ The term *face* refers to the respect one has for oneself.

▪ It is related to notions of being:

- Embarrassed
- Humiliated
- 'Losing face'

Maxims of Politeness

❖ Lakoff (1973) proposed three maxims of politeness:

1. Don't impose

- E.g. "I'm sorry to bother you but ... "

2. Give options

- E.g. "Do you think you could possibly ..."

3. Make your hearer feel good

- "You're better at this than me."

Following Politeness maxims

Mum: Is that you, Steph?

Stephanie: Yeah, it's me.

Mum: Hi darling.

Stephanie: I'm at Town Hall Station. Do you think you could possibly pick me up?

Mum: Yep

Stephanie: Or are you in a rush to have dinner so you can go out?

Mum: Oh we've already got dinner ready. But I'll come and get you.


Stephanie: Oh that'd be great. I'm at Town Hall.

Mum: Yep


Stephanie: OK. Thanks Mum

Mum: Bye

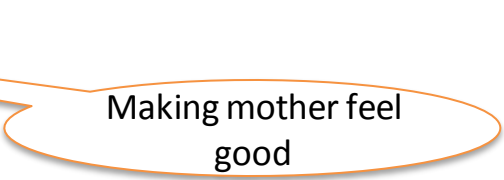
Stephanie: Bye



Elaborate
request



Giving options



Making mother feel
good

Politeness principles and cooperative principles are often in conflict with each other

❖ One principle can be more important than the other:

- **Example: Emergency**

- Less need to be polite
- More need to be cooperative

❖ *'Making a hearer feel good'* may not always be achieved in words, but in **how** the words are said.

- **Example: 'voice impression'**

People often maintain a balance between Involvement and Independence

- **Involvement (positive face)**
 - A person's right and need to be considered a 'normal,' contributing, supporting member of society
 - Evidenced by:
 - Showing interest in someone
 - Agreeing with others
 - Approving what others are doing
 - Using in-group identity markers (first names or nicknames)
- **Independence (negative face)**
 - A person's right not to be dominated by others, not to be imposed on by others, and to be able to act with individuality.
 - Evidenced by:
 - Respecting other people's needs or interests
 - Giving people options
 - Not imposing on other people
 - Apologizing for interruptions

Face and Politeness Across Cultures

- In some societies, **parents** have **more right** to **interfere** in the domestic affairs of adult children.
- In some cultures, a bedroom is **private** and cannot be entered.




Politeness strategies: Japanese/English bilinguals

When asking English speaking friends

- Could you close the window for me?
- Can I close the window?
- Hey yo, close the window, would you?

When asking Japanese speaking friends

- Isn't it a little chilly?
- It's cold, don't you think?
- I wonder why it's so cold today?



Indirectness is a sign of **involvement** and friendship in Japanese culture.

Politeness and Gender

- Holmes (1995) found that, overall, **women** are **more polite** than men.
- Mills in her book, *Gender and Politeness* (2003), argues that:
 - **Context** has an **important role** to play in **determining** whether something is **'polite'** or **not**.
 - We need to consider **who** is saying **what** to **whom**, from what **position**, **where** and for what **purpose**.

Example of Context Determining Politeness

Expression of intimacy

Hello,
gorgeous!



Act of harassment!

Hello,
gorgeous!



Politeness Strategies



Misery pretends to like company.

We use mitigation devices in conversations to take the edge off FTAs

- **Pre-sequence** is one mitigation device.

- Example:

A: Are you doing anything after work?

B: Why are you asking?

A: I thought we might go for a drink?

B: Well, no, nothing in particular. Where would you like to go?

Pre-sequence

Indirect Speech
Act

- **Off-record speech act** is another mitigation device.

- Example:

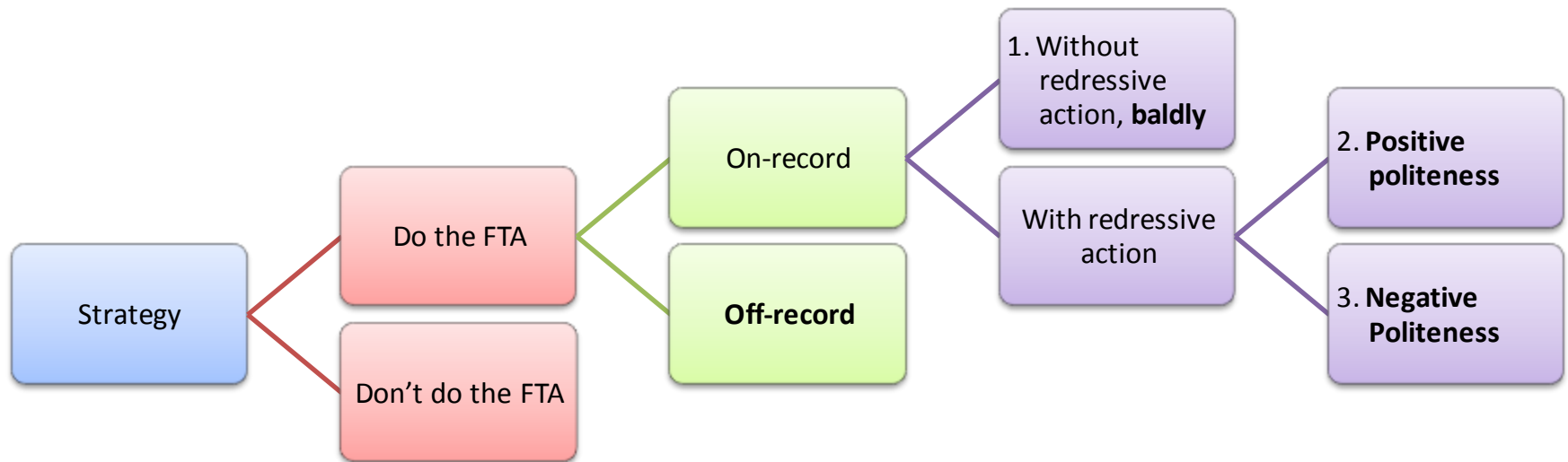
A: I'm dying for a cold drink?

B: Yes, it's really hot, isn't it?

Off-record Invitation

Off-record rejection of
invitation

Brown and Levinson's Model of Politeness Strategy (1987)



Politeness Strategies

To Redress FTAs



- No mention of an act to be requested.
- Need is only **hinted**, not mentioned
- Left for the hearer to infer the need

- Does NOT mean being impolite
- It respects the hearer's **negative face** (the need to be independent, have freedom of action, and not be imposed on by others).

- It respects the **positive face** (the need to be accepted and liked by others, treated as a member of the group, and to know one's wants are shared by others)

- Making a suggestion, request, offer or invitation in an open and **direct** way.
- Direct speech acts, contain imperatives with no mitigating devices.

Examples

1- 'I wonder where on earth that website is. I wish I could remember the address.'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
Indirect directive of 'request' for help – could be ignored	Quantity , not mentioning enough information about need for help	Off-record because, if challenged that one was asking for help, they could deny it.

2- 'You can never get enough of that cake! Good that I'm out of money'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
Indirect directive of 'request' for money – could be ignored	Relation	Off-record because people could choose to retreat behind the literal meaning.

Examples

3- 'Looks like someone had a good time last night'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
Indirect directive of 'request' for more information	Manner by being obscure and ambiguous.	Off-record because the hearer knows what is implied, but they have the freedom to respond to it or ignore it, without losing face.

4- 'Mary, give me the full address of your new house.'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
Direct directive 'order' for help	None	On-record - baldly because the hearer has to help, unless she wants to be rude or doesn't know the address.

Examples

5- 'I know you hate seafood, Andy, but a bite won't kill you! Take a bite! Man up, dude!'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
direct directive 'invitation' to take try the seafood.	None	Positive politeness because there is this solidarity strategy: knowledge of friend's personality 'hates seafood'.

6- 'Would you mind moving just slightly? I can't see the screen very clearly.'

Speech Act	Maxim Flouted	Politeness Strategy
Indirect directive 'request' to move slightly.	None	Negative politeness because it respects the hearer's autonomy, negative face; uses modal 'would,' makes a small imposition asking for 'slight' movement, and motivates the request by explaining that it's only because the screen can't be seen.