

Politeness Theory and Discourse

Chapter 3

Introduction to Discourse Analysis

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Importance of Politeness

- ❖ The concepts of **politeness** is **important** in interpreting **why** people choose to say things in a particular way in spoken or written discourse and **why they choose to:**
 - Flout a maxim.
 - Expresses an illocutionary act indirectly, rather than directly.

Politeness

❖ **Brown and Levinson** (1987) talked extensively about **politeness**. Their basic **argument** can be summarized as follows:

❖ *“When we enter into social relationships we have to acknowledge and show an **awareness** of **face**. This is very much reflected in the way we interact with one another.”*

❖ **Face: The respect one has for herself or himself.**

Politeness Strategies

- ❖ **Politeness strategies** are developed in order to **save** the **hearer's face**.
 - i.e. we usually try to **avoid** embarrassing the hearer or making him/her feel uncomfortable.
- ❖ Universally, we usually **respect** each other's **expectations** regarding **self-image**; we take account of others' feelings and avoid **Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)**.

Face Threatening Acts

- ❖ **Face Threatening Acts:** Acts that infringe on the hearer's need to maintain her/his self-esteem and to be respected.
 - **Example:** When you ask a classmate to lend you her class-notes, you would be infringing on her exclusive right to her notes.
 - i.e. you would be **imposing** on her to give you something that is hers.
- ❖ Thus, **face threatening acts** (FTAs) are often **unavoidable**.
 - **Speakers** can **redress** a FTA with **negative politeness** that **respects** the **hearer's negative face**. Or **they** can **redress** the FTA with **positive politeness**, which respects the **hearers' positive face**.

Negative Face & Positive Face

❖ **Negative face:** The person's desire to be:

1. **Autonomous** (self-governing)
2. **Free**
3. **Not imposed on** by others
4. **Respected** by others in terms of **time**, **privacy** and **possession**.

❖ **Positive face:** The person's need to be:

1. **Accepted** and **liked** by others
2. Treated as a **member** of their group.

❖ In our **interactions** with one another, we are **aware** of our hearers' **positive** and **negative faces** and we try to **redress** our **FTAs** to **protect** those **faces**.

Examples to Think About

- 1- “Come on, let’s grab lunch next week!”
- 2- “I’m wondering if you could join us for lunch next week.”
- 3- “Could you , please, join us for lunch next week?”
- 4- “I don’t mean to impose, but I thought, if possible, we could have lunch together next week.”

Example 1

1- “Come on, let’s grab lunch next week!”

- It **threatens** the **negative** face because it **imposes** on the hearer’s **time**. In this utterance, we give **importance** to the **positive** face by showing the hearer that he/ she is **liked** and is a treated like a **friend**.

Example 2

2- “I’m wondering if you could join us for lunch next week.”

- This utterance shows more **awareness** of the **negative face**.
 - i.e. the speaker **respects** the hearer’s **time** and does **not impose** on him/ her. However, there is **more social distance** than there is in example 1 which affects the **positive face**.

Example 3

3- “Could you , please, join us for lunch next week?”

- Invitations are face threatening acts because they impose on the time of the hearer that is why they **threaten** the **negative face**. The way to invite someone varies according to many factors including the social distance, age, degree of formality, status and role.
- This utterance is in the interrogative syntactic structure to give a choice to the hearer.

Example 4

4- “I don’t mean to impose, but I thought, if possible, we could have lunch together next week.”

- This utterance is more formal and more polite and shows awareness of the **negative** face.

Politeness Strategies

❖ There are **four politeness strategies** used by people to **maintain a balance** in **protecting** the **positive** and the **negative faces** of each other and **acting appropriately in social interactions.**

- **Politeness Strategies:**

1. **Off-record** (Least direct- Most polite)
2. **Negative politeness**
3. **Positive politeness**
4. **On record baldly** (Most direct- Least polite)

Politeness Strategies

- If we view the strategies on a continuous line, it would look like this:



Off-record	Negative Politeness	Positive politeness	On -record baldly
Least direct	Less direct	More direct	Most direct
Most Polite	Very polite	Less polite	Least polite

- Thus, the less direct you are, the more polite you seem to be.
- Conversely, the more blunt in stating your needs in interactions, the less polite you seem to be.

Example

- If you want to borrow your neighbor's vacuum cleaner, this is how you may ask:



Off-Record

Our vacuum cleaner
Just broke down!
The floors are very
dusty!

Negative politeness

Could I, please, borrow your
vacuum cleaner for just an hour?
(Still a question to leave an option)

Positive politeness

Susu, dear, I need to borrow
the vacuum cleaner!

On-Record baldly

Get the vacuum cleaner!

- If you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to borrow your neighbor's vacuum cleaner you may use these strategies but **each** is **appropriate** in its **own context**.

1- Off-Record Strategy

Example on the off-record strategy:

“Our vacuum cleaner just broke down! The floors are very dusty!”

- **When would you use such a strategy?**
 - You are not that familiar with your neighbor, or you know that she is the type who does not like lending her appliances.
- **In this context:**
 - **No mention** of an **act** to be requested: You do not state that you want to borrow the vacuum cleaner explicitly.
 - The **need** is only **hinted**, **not mentioned**: By hinting it, you are being very respectful of your neighbor’s autonomy.
 - i.e. you are giving her the option of not taking the hint, and pretending she did not understand you!
- **Why is this strategy considered the most polite? Why is it the least threatening of all strategies to the hearer’s negative face?**
 - Because it respects the hearer’s possession and right to be autonomous and not imposed on by others.

2- Negative Politeness

Example on the negative politeness strategy:

“Could I, please, borrow your vacuum cleaner for just an hour?”

- **When would you use such a strategy?**
 - You still want to maintain distance from your neighbour, observing her right to her possession (i.e. her vacuum cleaner), so you express that you want to borrow it from her, but you do so in the form of: a yes/no question to give her the option.
 - So, you may be more familiar with your neighbor here, but you are still not that close
- **In this context:**
 - The **act** is **mentioned explicitly**: “borrow your vacuum cleaner”
 - Using a **yes – or – no question** to give an **option** to the hearer acknowledging her right to her possession.
 - using ‘**could**’ which expresses the **remote possibility** of her allowing this to happen;
 - Using ‘please’ to be more polite
 - Using the **possessive** determiner ‘your’
 - Using the prepositional **time phrase** ‘for just an hour’ to **minimize the imposition.**

3- Positive Politeness

Example on the positive politeness strategy:

“Susu, dear, I need the vacuum cleaner right away!”

- **When would you use such a strategy?**
 - When there is **less social distance** between the speaker and the hearer; they are **close** to each other (**friends**).
- **In this context:**
 - The **act** is **mentioned explicitly** and **directly**: “I need the vacuum cleaner”
 - Linguistic features that show **closeness**:
 - Using a **nickname** addressing the hearer: “Susu”
 - Using an **endearment term**: “dear”
 - Using the **definite article** “the” instead of “your”
 - The **time** expression “right away”
- **Given the relationship between the speaker and hearer, how would the hearer feel if negative politeness was used instead?**
 - The hearer would feel like a stranger because the speaker is infringing on her **positive** face, i.e. her right to be **liked** and **part** of a group (a friend)

4- On-Record Baldly

Example on the on-record baldly strategy:

“Bring me the vacuum cleaner!”

- **When would you use such a strategy?**
 - It sounds very impolite, but there are contexts in which it is the only appropriate strategy such as very close sister.
- **In this context:**
 - The **act** is **mentioned explicitly** and **bluntly**: “bring me the vacuum cleaner”
 - Using the **imperative** syntactic structure (**direct directive**) : “bring me”
 - Using the **definite article** “the” instead of “your”
 - No time specified.

EXERCISES

Notes

- ❖ The extent of **option-giving** influences the **degree** of **politeness**.
 - The **greater option** you give to your hearer to say 'no', the **more polite** your utterance is.
 - **Example:**
 - *"I couldn't borrow \$30, could I?"* is more polite than *"Could I borrow \$ 30?"* and even more polite than *"Lend me 30\$."*

Appropriateness & Politeness Strategies

The **context** of the utterance **decides** which of the four **strategies** is more **appropriate**.

Appropriateness – Off-Record Strategy

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The **speaker** is **not that familiar** with **hearer**.
 - So the **speaker** gives the **hearer** the **option** of not taking the hint, and pretending she/he did not understand.
 - By hinting the need, the **speaker** is being very respectful of your **hearer's autonomy**, i.e. **negative face**.
- There is **social distance** between **speaker** and **hearer**.
 - Including **differences** in **age**, **status**, **role**, [**gender**]...etc.
- **Imposition** is **great**.

Appropriateness – Negative Politeness

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The **speaker** still wants to maintain distance from the **hearer**.
- The **speaker** may be **more familiar** with the **hearer** but still **NOT** that **close**.

Appropriateness – Positive Politeness

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The **speaker** and the **hearer** are close friends.
- **Imposition** is **small**.

Appropriateness - On-Record Baldly

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The speaker has **authority** over the hearer either by being **higher in status** or has a more **dominant role**.
- The speaker is in a **hurry**.
- It is an **emergency** situation.
- **Imposition** is **small**.

FTA's

- ❖ **Face threatening acts:** Acts that infringe on the hearer's need to maintain her/his self-esteem and to be respected.
 - i.e. acts that threaten either the **negative** or the **positive** face of hearer.

Remember that:

- **Negative face:** The person's desire to be **autonomous, free, not imposed on** by others and **respected** by others in terms of **time, privacy** and **possession**.
- **Positive face:** The person's need to be accepted and liked by others and Treated as a member of their group.
- **FTA's** are sometimes **unavoidable**, but **speakers** usually **redress** their **FTA's** through the various **politeness strategies**.

Examples of FTAs to the Negative Face

1. A demand for an action.
2. A request to:
 - I. Borrow from the hearer
 - II. Take something from hearer
 - III. Occupy the hearer's time (e.g. invitations)
3. Personal questions.

Examples of FTAs to the Positive Face

1. **Rejecting** an invitation.
2. **Disagreeing** with the hearer.
3. **Refusing** a proposal.
4. **Criticising** the hearer.

Exercises

1. Husband to wife:

“Honey, I am wearing the last clean shirt I found in the closet!”

Politeness strategy: _____

Maxim flouted: _____

Speech act: _____

2. A college dean to an applicant for a job at the college:

“You might be happier at a smaller –or a larger- college, son!”

Politeness strategy: _____

Maxim flouted: _____

Speech act: _____

Answers

- **In the first example, asking** the wife **to** wash the shirts is **threatening** to her **negative face**, so the husband **redresses** the act by using **off-record politeness strategy**. He also **flouts** the maxim of **manner** and uses an **indirect directive**.
- **In the second example, rejecting** the applicant is **threatening** to his **positive face**, so the dean **redresses** the act through the use of **off-record politeness strategy**. He also **flouts** the maxims of **manner**, **quality**, and **quantity**, and uses an **indirect speech act of rejecting**.

Context and the Choice of Politeness Strategies

People choose the appropriate politeness strategy based on the context as follows:

1- Situational Context:

- I. **Size of imposition:** The **greater** the **imposition** the **more polite (indirect)** the strategy.
- II. **Setting of the interaction:** The **more formal** the **setting**, the **more polite** the strategy.

2- Social Context:

- I. **Social distance:** The **greater** the **social distance**, the **more polite (indirect)** the strategy.
 - **Social distance increases or decreases according to:**
 - a. Degree of **familiarity** (how well and how long have you known each other)
 - b. Differences of **status** (e.g. **boss, employee**)
 - c. **Roles** (**teacher/students, parent/child**)
 - d. **Age**
 - e. **Gender**
 - f. **Education**
 - g. **Social class**
- II. **Power relations :** **Differences** of **status, age, role, gender, education, and social class** give **speakers power** and **authority**. Power and authority can be **expressed** through the **linguistic choices** a speaker makes. In terms of **politeness**, those who possess power **can be more direct** and **blunt**
 - i.e. **less polite** (towards the right of the continuum), and vice versa.