



An investigation into politeness, small talk and gender

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In this essay I will explore small talk as a form of linguistic politeness and question the accuracy of the stereotypical association of small talk with women's speech. I will begin with an examination of politeness, in particular the model devised by Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]), and then move more specifically on to examining small talk in terms of both its link to gender and its importance socially and professionally. I will consider approaches to language and gender such as the 'difference' approach evident in the work of Deborah Tannen (1991) and Janet Holmes (1995). The bulk of my essay, however, will constitute an account and critique of the more recent theories behind gender and small talk, particularly Sara Mills' (2003) reaction to Holmes' (1995) argument, and Mills' (2003) own work in analysing gender in terms of performativity, and politeness in terms of Communities of Practice. I will further explore Holmes' recent co-authored work (2003/2004/2005) on the significance of small talk in the workplace. This essay will thus illustrate the chronological development of sociolinguistic theories on politeness, small talk and gender, showing a definite shift in the approaches over time. I will conclude that small talk is of crucial importance in maintaining relationships not only socially but also in professional situations. Furthermore, in my research reading I have observed the problems with making gender based generalisations, and have thus come to the conclusion that theoretically we cannot draw solid conclusions about the different ways men and women speak. Instead we should view gender as a performance, and small talk as a form of gendered discourse which has been stereotypically associated with women by society. Individuals can thus make their own choice whether or not to linguistically enact these gender stereotypes.

Politeness

I will begin my exposition of the sociolinguistic theoretical frameworks surrounding politeness and small talk by examining and exploring the pivotal work of Brown and Levinson (1987), who stress the importance of politeness in avoiding communication breakdown between individuals. Much other work that has since been written on politeness expands on the model proposed by Brown and Levinson, and it is therefore at the core of any sociolinguistic exploration in this field. The significance of their work in politeness theory is paramount: Gino Elin (2001) has argued that, 'The names Brown and Levinson have become almost synonymous with the word 'politeness' itself' (3), and Sara Mills (2003) has stated that their 'model of politeness has influenced almost all of the theoretical and analytical work in this field' (57). This is because, as Brown and Levinson explain in their own words, their model pioneers a new way of looking at politeness, arguing 'for a shift in emphasis from the current pre-occupation with speaker identity, to a focus on dyadic patterns of verbal interaction as the expression of social relationships' (1987:2).

Their model is based on the notion of face, which is essentially an individuals' self-esteem, and Brown and Levinson (1987) use it to explain politeness behaviour in social interaction. The model revolves around the existence of Face Threatening Acts. A FTA,

unless it is an unmitigated ‘bald on record’ (1987:59), must be mitigated by the use of certain strategies (which essentially constitute politeness) to avoid a breakdown in communication. They make a ‘distinction between acts that threaten negative face and those that threaten positive face’ (1987:61), as according to their model, every individual has a ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ face. In general, they argue, it is in the ‘mutual interest’ for people interacting with each other ‘to maintain each other’s face’ (1987:59). Thus the distinction between the two types of face can be explained as such: a person’s negative face is ‘the want of every ‘competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others’, whereas positive face is ‘the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others’ (1978:62).

Thus at the crux of their model is the distinction between positive and negative politeness, the former being used for ‘the expression of solidarity’ and the latter for ‘the expression of restraint’ (1987:2). Our everyday interpretation of politeness coincides with their notion of negative politeness, as they explain: ‘In our culture, negative politeness is the most elaborate and the most conventionalised set of linguistic strategies’ (1987:130). It is apparent that their development of the notion of positive politeness is central to an analysis of small talk as a form of politeness, and for that reason I will begin by applying their model of politeness to my investigation. This is not to say that in more recent sociological work modifications and criticisms of this model have not been suggested, but these will be raised later in the essay when looking at more modern approaches.

An examination of what is actually meant by small talk and the common perceptions of the role it plays are also necessary before the issue can be explored in full. Malinowski (1972 [1923]) introduced the concept of ‘phatic communion’, emphasising how bonds between people can be formed through talking. He defines this as a ‘type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words’ (1972:151). Essentially, the meaning behind small talk lies in the speech act itself, not the content, and as Malinowski writes, ‘A mere phrases of politeness... fulfils a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant’ (1972:151). Popular attitudes to small talk are normally to regard it as ‘a conventionalised and peripheral mode of talk’ (Coupland 2000:1), and this should be contested in sociolinguistic study. Furthermore, as small talk also seems to be inextricably connected to the issue of gender, feminist sociolinguistics is normally geared towards reinvesting small talk with ‘positive communicative value’ (Coupland 2000:7).

The difference approach to gender

Sociolinguistic work on small talk in the 1980’s and early 1990’s focused on the notion of gossip and celebrated its use by women to maintain social relationships. In these terms small talk can clearly be interpreted as a form of positive politeness, if we apply the Brown and Levinson (1987) model discussed above. Small talk and its relation to gender was explored by feminist linguists like Deborah Tannen (1991), who explored the differences between men and women’s use of language, thus creating a binary opposite between the two genders. This emphasis on the different speech habits of men and women is referred to as the ‘difference’ approach. Tannen (1991) stressed the importance of small talk, or more specifically ‘gossip’, as being a crucial element in women’s speech to build and consolidate relationships. On the other hand, men do not engage in small talk for the same purpose. Tannen argues that for women, ‘small talk is crucial to maintain a sense of camaraderie when there is nothing special to say’ (1991:102), and furthermore, gossip ‘creates a friendship, when the listener responds in the expected way’ (98).

Thus Tannen (1991) attempts to make categorical observations about the different speech styles of men and women. This approach lays the foundations for much of the later work on politeness, small talk and gender, and this celebration of women’s speech styles is a definite improvement on the approaches to language and gender that preceded it. These

included the 'deficit' and 'dominance' approaches by those such as Lakoff (1975), which arguably conveyed a negative portrayal of women's speech. Although I do not align myself with Tannen's difference approach to gender, because of reasons discussed later, the importance of the sense of equality between men and women's speech styles it created was an important progression.

Tannen's (1991) assertion that small talk is crucial in maintaining social relationships fits in nicely with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on positive face. Brown and Levinson further explain that positive politeness is used 'to imply common ground or sharing of wants' and can be a type of 'social accelerator' (1987:103) and even casual gossip seems to fit this bill: thus small talk is an obvious part of positive politeness behaviour if we apply Brown and Levinson's approach to politeness strategies.

However, there are several significant criticisms of the difference approach which need to be considered. Tannen (1991) stereotypically associates the notions of gossip and small talk to women and this may not necessarily be accurate. This means that these stereotypes are thus maintained, and not challenged, which arguably makes this approach circular: by taking difference as a pre-given, and using difference as a conclusion on the studies, no real observations are really being made.

Additionally, much of Tannen's (1991) evidence given seems to be anecdotal evidence and casual observations of the different ways men and women use language. Sara Mills (2003) has found this type of early feminist research problematic and points out that it 'often focused exclusively on the language of white, middle class women, and then made generalisations about all women' (174), which makes the research fall short of finding any real universal findings.

Furthermore as Tannen (1991) stresses that small talk is important in consolidating women's friendships, she does not explore the notion that small talk could be essential to more important public contexts such as in the workplace. Small talk is still thus treated as a social activity, a form of politeness that is relatively unimportant. Nevertheless, the difference approach used by Tannen (1991) lays a platform for subsequent sociolinguist work on gender, and the ideas are left open for elaboration or contestation by other sociolinguists.

This 'difference' model, examining the different ways men and women use language, was developed in further detail by Janet Holmes (1995), which she applied generally to politeness and came to the sensational conclusion that 'women are more polite than men' (1). Although with hindsight this conclusion can be seen as a rather sweeping generalisation, the importance of Holmes's statement cannot be denied as it sparked much sociolinguist debate. Holmes (1995) derived this rather sweeping conclusion from two premises: firstly, that 'politeness is an expression of concern for the feelings of others' (4) and secondly, that 'women's utterances show evidence of concerns for the feelings of the people they are talking to' (6). The essence of this distinction lies in the way that women, according to Holmes, use 'language to establish, nurture and develop personal relationships', as opposed to men who 'see language more as a tool for obtaining and conveying information' (1995:2). This is labelled as the 'affective' function of language and the 'referential' function (1995:3) respectively.

Holmes openly shows the influence of one of her sociolinguistic predecessors when she writes that, 'As Tannen (1990) has illustrated well, it is in private, informal contexts that women's and men's view of the primary functions of talk, and of what it means to be polite, come into most direct conflict' (69). She makes a further reference back to the analysis of women and gossip in the 1980's and early 1990's when she comments that, 'a great deal of the kind of conversation which is popularly labelled 'gossip' illustrates both functions' (1995:4), emphasising how small talk is key to social relations. Thus a significant criticism here seems to be that Holmes (1995) is using the preceding work on language and gender

somewhat indiscriminately, and thus Holmes' conclusion that women are more polite than men is undermined by those criticisms that apply to the difference model in general.

Therefore there are clearly problems with Holmes' categorical assertion that women are more polite than men. Many of them are the same as the ones discussed above in the critique of Tannen (1991) and the 'difference' model. Holmes' (1995) conclusion is clearly formed on stereotypes, as methodological issues clearly constrain anybody from surveying the whole female population. For this reason it is essentially impossible to make solid gender-based conclusions regarding differentiations in language usage, as every statement made becomes an over-generalisation.

Sara Mills (2003) has launched a rather scathing attack on Holmes' work (1995), but the points she makes are significant. She dedicates a large portion of her *Gender and Politeness* (2003) to the argument that Holmes' assertion 'is in fact based on a stereotypical view of women's language' (214). She argues that Holmes has thus formed generalisations from a small sample of women, and encapsulates this in a statement criticising the 'problematic tension between the specificity of her interpretation of her data and her wish to make generalisations from those data' (2003:215). Despite Holmes' (1991) attempt to draw some solid conclusions regarding of the difference in language use between men and women, I am forced to reject the difference model of gender because it is so problematic: gender cannot be treated as such a static and dichotomised entity.

The performative approach to gender and re-thinking politeness

Instead Mills (2003) calls for a more radical approach to gender and language, creating a necessary progression in the field with her approach. In her work on gender and politeness, she praises the fact that in more recent times, 'gender has begun to be theorised in more productive ways, moving away from a reliance on binary oppositions and global statements about the behaviour of all men and all women' (2003:169). She instead proposes that gender, and everything that goes with it, is merely a performance. She argues that certain practices that are considered to be polite are in fact 'stereotypically gendered' (2003:202), and not necessarily based on the truth.

The strengths of Mills' (2003) approach are obvious and combat many of the criticisms that made the difference model so problematic. Gender should definitely be treated as fluid and dynamic, with people being able to perform different linguistic gender identities whenever they want. Rather, society associates speech styles with either gender, and people can then choose to perform whatever language style they desire. It also accommodates for the fact that people can choose to use language differently in every encounter, and Mills calls for a need to see gender identity 'as constructed in slightly different ways in each interaction' (2005: 263). For these reasons I instead align myself with Mills' model of gender, the performative model. It seems wrong to categorically state that the two genders use language in different ways, and Mill's approach takes into consideration the extent of the complexities when analysing language and gender.

In looking at small talk as a form of politeness one needs to be sure of their definition of politeness. Mills (2003) also offers a much more fluid approach to politeness, attempting to narrow the model down and make it more specific. Although the impact of Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness cannot be ignored, as research into the area progressed it became apparent that their model of politeness was not completely infallible and that the issue of politeness may be more complex than it was initially perceived. Sara Mills (2003) critiqued that fact that many theorists were 'simply applying Brown and Levinson's model without modification' (58) and proposed her own model of politeness. Her criticisms of Brown and Levinson's model stemmed from her belief that 'in some respects, it works a little

too well' (2003:57) and that it was 'clear the politeness is a much more complex phenomenon' (2003:57).

Mills (2003) thus develops a 'far more complex model of politeness which is concerned with the way that assessments of what politeness consists of are developed by individuals engaging with others in communities of practice, in the process of mapping out identities and positions for themselves and others within hierarchies and affiliative networks' (2003:58). Mills (2003) asserts that 'decisions about what is appropriate or not are decided upon strategically within the parameters of the communities of practice rather than being decided upon by each individual once and for all' (235). Whilst Mills' (2003) contribution in recognising the complexity of politeness is crucial, and her emphasis on politeness being specific to Communities of Practice is an invaluable consideration, her model of politeness makes it essentially impossible to judge politeness as an outsider. For this reason I do not fully reject Brown and Levinson's model of politeness for Mills'.

Locher and Watts (2005) also re-think the politeness model, and choose to use the term 'relational work' when discussing politeness. They critique the Brown and Levinson model, because they believe that 'human beings do not restrict themselves to forms of co-operative communication in which face-threatening is mitigated' (2005:28). They instead argue that 'Brown and Levinson's framework can still be used, however, if we look at the strategies they have proposed to be possible realisations of what we call 'relational work' (2005:10). This notion of politeness, looking at 'all forms of verbal interaction in their own right' (29) rather than an objective, solid model, is heavily apparent in much of the later sociolinguistic work on small talk and politeness which I will now discuss.

Relational Practice

Significantly, Holmes and Marra's (2004) co-authored essay considers politeness in the workplace, arguably triggered by Mills' (2003) call for more 'nuanced and mitigated statements about certain groups of women or men in particular circumstances' (169). As small talk is a significant linguistic form of politeness, it is also under study. Their examination of the role of small talk in public domains, rather than only private ones, is therefore a key development in this sociolinguistic field. They argue that politeness in general plays an important role in building and consolidating workplace relations, and furthermore note that workplace collegiality is essential to achieve organisational goals. With regards to small talk in particular, they argue that 'the label "small talk" itself explicitly signals the perceived status of this type of talk as trivial and irrelevant to serious workplace business' (2004:381). They believe that this needs to be contested so that the importance of small talk in the workplace can be realised.

Holmes and Marra (2004) apply the term Relational Practice (RP) to their discussion of workplace interaction, which they use instead of 'politeness'. RP, developed from the work of Fletcher (1999), has to have three components: firstly, it is oriented to the "face needs" of others. Secondly, it 'serves to advance the primary objectives of the workplace', and thirdly, they argue, 'RP practices at work are regarded as dispensable, irrelevant or peripheral' (2004:78). RP plays a key role in enforcing and emphasising 'the importance of good team relations in furthering project goals' (2004:388). They believe that small talk fits these categories and is important in building workplace relations, stating that 'small talk and social talk at work clearly serve the function of establishing and nurturing workplace relationships' (2004:381). Holmes and Marra (2004) thus argue that people maintain positive workplace relationships by using small talk to improve collegiality and encourage others to perform to the best of their ability. This then shows that 'people are very skilled in exploiting the multifunctional aspects of human communication systems' (2004:80), showing that people change their language use to gain certain effects. At this point, arguably for the first

time, it is proposed that small talk is of fundamental importance in professional environments, breaking free from the stereotypical assumption that small talk is mainly used by women in purely informal conversation. I thus align myself with the opinion, as Holmes and Stubbe (2003) have also noted in a different work, that 'social talk, including small talk, cannot be dismissed as a peripheral, marginal or minor discourse mode' (89). Up until this point the importance of small talk in public spheres had arguably not been recognised.

To distinguish small talk in the workplace, Holmes (2000) places talk on a continuum, 'with 'core business talk' at one end and 'phatic communion' at the other' (36). The problem in identifying small talk shows that 'apparently peripheral and innocuous phatic exchanges can serve pivot roles in furthering the interpersonal (and sometimes transactional/instrumental) goals of those involved' (2000:36), emphasising the point that it is often hard to recognise small talk and showing how it is an essential element in interaction.

In a later work, Holmes and Schnurr (2005) explain the reasoning behind using the term RP to refer to workplace politeness. Apparently, it has the 'advantage of avoiding the definitional traps, referential slipperiness, and emotional baggage of the term 'politeness' (124). Nevertheless, it seems hard to see that much of a differentiation between the two, to the extent that Mullany has noted that 'it is unclear how Holmes and Schnurr's (2005) use of the term differs from Brown and Levinson's approach to politeness' (60). Holmes, and her two co-authors, do not seem sure of this either, as Holmes and Marra (2004) concedes that 'the parallels with Brown and Levinson's concepts of positive and negative face, crucial components of politeness theory, are obvious' (381).

At any rate, I believe that Holmes' (2004 & 2005) discussion of relational practice is significant as small talk, as a form of politeness, is proven to have play a greater role than merely in women's social talk. There is a clear progression from Holmes' (1995) conclusion that women are more polite than men: she now strives to prove the importance of politeness, and small talk as a component of this, across the sexes. As RP is generally used to improve or maintain workplace relations, it would be preposterous to assert that only women take on this role. Holmes and Marra's article thus opens with the statement that relational responsibility is not 'quintessentially "women's work"' (2004:378), despite the fact that it is still stereotypically associated with women. The reasons behind this clearly need to be explored.

Holmes and Marra (2004) therefore make the necessary consideration of whether 'such talk instantiates stereotypically feminine discourse' (382). They eventually conclude that, 'our analysis clearly demonstrates that RP is by no means the sole prerogative of women' (2004:390). Despite this, they accept that 'RP typically contributes to the construction of a more "feminine" or other-oriented social identity' (2004:391), and this is because of the 'gender stereotypes that pervade our culture' (2004:391). Fundamentally, they decide, 'relational practice is constructed as "gendered" workplace practice' (2004:378). It cannot be ignored that the language use associated with creating and consolidating ties between people is thought of as typical of women's speech, and they argue that it is impossible 'to escape the constraints of such ingrained social practices' (2004:392). It seems that, instead of making stereotypes herself, Holmes evades making generalisations by talking of stereotypes made by society. I believe that this is a clear progression from her earlier work and her much more fluid approach to the relationship between gender and language is definitely noteworthy.

In Holmes' earlier work (1995) she was faulted on her methodology for drawing over-generalisations from restricted data. She avoids doing this in her recent work (2004 & 2005) and is clearly aware of the methodological constraints in analysing politeness in terms of gender, especially in the workplace. Thus Holmes and Marra (2004) note that 'it is impossible to document all instances of RP' and that 'most instances go undocumented and

unseen' (2004:390) meaning that it is somewhat different to draw firm conclusions on RP, such as in what forms it is used, and who uses it.

Furthermore, in a different work on power and politeness, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) assert that 'Gathering good data in the wide diversity of places where people spend their working day poses a formidable range of methodological challenges' (19). Two issues are at play here: first of all, no workplace is the same, so conclusions are in danger of becoming generalisations, and secondly, the nature of the workplace means that the sociolinguistic study can be too intrusive. For all of these reasons, it seems impossible that there will ever be enough solid data from which to draw a strong, supported conclusion regarding whether women do use small talk in the workplace more than men, or in general if women are more polite than men. Despite all the sociolinguistic work on women's speech, there is surely not enough work or empirical evidence on men and masculinities to draw a balanced verdict.

In conclusion, I have explored small talk as a form of politeness and questioned the validity of the stereotypical assumption that small talk is more characteristic of women's speech than men's. In trying to determine the truth of this statement I have encountered a huge amount of difficulties that particularly relate to the complexities surrounding gender. Furthermore, in examining small talk as a form of politeness I have found settling on a definition of politeness itself to also be problematic. Nevertheless from my research I have drawn several conclusions. From my more or less outright rejection of the difference approach to gender, this prevents me from drawing any solid conclusions regarding the difference in speech styles between men and women. Instead, by aligning myself with the performativity approach, I conceptualise small talk as a gendered discourse, which is stereotypically associated with women by society. Women can thus choose to perform this female identity linguistically if they want to. This is relevant to relational practice, as women managers can choose to use this stereotypically female linguistic device to improve workplace relations, but similarly though, men can also perform this identity if they want to. Therefore I have explored small talk as a form of politeness and have concluded that it is not necessarily true that women engage in small talk more than men.

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