Is the Brown and Levinson (1987) Model of Politeness as useful and influential as originally claimed? An assessment of the revised Brown and Levinson (1987) Model.

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Brown and Levinson's model of politeness first appeared in *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (Goody, 1978), before being reissued in a volume of its own nine years later. It has frequently been described as one of the most influential politeness frameworks to emerge from sociolinguists (e.g. Eelen, 2001:3; Fraser, 2005:65; Ming-Chung, 2003:1680) and for that reason has been widely applied and considered. This essay aims to assess this influence and the usefulness of the model over thirty years after its formation by analysing its main claims, looking at its applications in sociolinguistic research and taking into account the collection of criticism it has received. This will allow a considered conclusion to be drawn, as to whether the Brown and Levinson (henceforth B&L) model of politeness is as applicable and influential as originally claimed.

     The model aims to account for the phenomenon of politeness and the 'extraordinary parallelism in the linguistic minutiae of the utterances with which persons choose to express themselves in quite unrelated languages' (B&L, 1987:55). B&L suggest therefore, that they can account for underlying modes of communication that are universal to human interaction, and reflect the 'assumptions and inferences' made in the planning of speech (1987:56). They begin their account by establishing the idea of 'face', derived from Goffman (1967), as something that is managed in interaction through the use of politeness features. They go on to suggest that face can be divided into two aspects; 'Negative Face' and 'Positive Face', defined as follows:

> Negative Face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others.
> Positive Face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. (1987:62)

During interaction these concepts are threatened to varying degrees, giving rise to the term 'Face Threatening Acts' (FTAs) (B&L, 1987:65), and require the use of politeness strategies to maintain harmony and undamaged face. FTAs may threaten an addressee's negative face wants through an impeding action such as an order or request, their positive face wants by disregarding the addressee's feelings such as through criticism or accusation, or endanger both aspects of face simultaneously. B&L propose five 'super-strategies' (1987:92) that a speaker may then employ to carry out a FTA, before extensively listing derivative approaches and their linguistic realizations. The five super-strategies are as follows: bald on-record without redressive action, on-record with redressive action orientated towards positive or negative face, off record, or not to perform the FTA. They argue that certain factors will influence strategy choice, specifically the variables of social distance (D), relative power (P)

and absolute ranking of the imposition (Rx). Together these create the following formula to calculate the weightiness (Wx) of a particular speech act between the speaker (S) and hearer (H), helping the speaker to decide upon a strategy:

$$Wx = D (S,H) + P (H,S) + Rx. (1987:74-6)$$

Although B&L state that these factors are context relevant, they also claim that their theory is universally applicable, concluding that:

> The essential idea is this: interactional systematics are based largely on universal principles. But the application of the principles differs systematically across cultures, and within cultures across subcultures, categories and groups. (1987:283)

Following this condensed account it is clear that the theory is comprehensive and has its roots in established, respected research. B&L verify their model with research findings from the study of three dissimilar languages which they claim demonstrates the universality. They conclude their book by stating that they have described and accounted for the phenomenon of politeness and have developed a valuable tool for sociolinguistic analysis (1987:283-4).

In assessing the model's usefulness it is informative to look at research where it has been applied and produced valuable results. During her research into language differences between genders in New Zealand, Janet Holmes (1990, 1995) has utilized B&L's model extensively. In her chapter titled *Politeness Strategies in New Zealand Women's Speech* (Bell and Holmes, 1990) she uses B&L's model in conjunction with other theories, pointing out particular similarities with Lakoff's 'Rules of Politeness' and Brown and Gilman's concepts of power and solidarity (1990:253-7). These similarities strengthen B&L's position as they support and provide evidence for certain aspects of the model. Holmes draws on the definitions of positive and negative politeness, FTAs and the variables of power and distance and applies them to her data to ascertain the differences between men's and women's speech. Her findings then conform to B&L's politeness strategies, such as in the case of positive face:

> Compliments clearly function as positively affected speech acts which serve to increase or consolidate solidarity between the speaker and the addressee. (1990:265)

This demonstrates that studies other than B&L's own and data from English-speaking countries other than Britain support the model. Holmes also continues to use B&L's theory as her definition of politeness in other publications, such as *Women, Men and Politeness* (Holmes, 1995) where she recounts the model in the opening chapter, before going on to conclude that men's apology behaviour exemplifies the theory more strongly than women's (1995:186).

Further research that has successfully applied the framework has been carried out by Chris Lane (1990). He studied lawyers' questioning in criminal trials at the Auckland District Court, specifically using the B&L equation to quantifiably determine the weightiness of a FTA, in addition to the analysis of politeness strategies used and deliberately misused in cross-examinations.

These are just two examples of researchers who have used the model to help explain their research findings, but as stated earlier, many sociolinguistics have declared B&L's to be one of the most influential and widely used models of politeness. The date of both Holmes's and Lane's research demonstrates that the model was still not considered out-dated, despite being nearly twenty years older than *Women, Men and Politeness*. Additionally, its use alongside and in cooperation with similar models is also significant, as it demonstrates that

there are converging theories to support B&L's assertions. However, accompanying this acclaim and application is also a large selection of criticism. The range of theories in the field of politeness suggests that it is a highly controversial and debated topic, and although other theories may support B&L's model, they are also able to highlight its limitations. Looking at this criticism allows a rounded perspective and will form a more considered opinion as to whether the model is still useful.

Gino Eelen (2001) has contributed an extensive review of acclaimed politeness theories, and focuses a large amount of his scrutiny on B&L's model. In particular he targets an elementary yet intrinsic criticism by drawing on Pike's (1967) distinctions between emic and etic linguistics, and applying the difference to B&L's framework. He suggests that emic knowledge, in terms of politeness, is the speaker's assessment of their behaviour in the commonsense meaning of being polite. Whereas etic knowledge is the scientific conceptualisation of such behaviour applied by sociolinguists, usually to help explain or predict its occurrences (2001:76-7). B&L's theory can therefore be described as originating in etic form, as an engineered, sociolinguistic framework. The process of their theory then converts this scientific conceptualization back to emic illustrations. For example, the concept of a FTA is established and then qualified by numerous real-life examples. Similarly a Model Person is proposed as a scientific entity before being realised as 'every competent member' of a culture (B&L, 1987:62). However, Eelen argues that this reversal of etic to emic should not be taken for granted, but requires explicit explanation:

> The transfer from etics to emics implies that ordinary speakers not only share the scientist's notion of politeness, but also his or her epistemological perspective, even up to the point where they are assumed to construct a theory of social interaction, on the basis of which they subsequently act. (2001:82)

Once highlighted, this oversight of the nature of the bridge between the linguistic concept and everyday usage is a limitation of B&L's model. How speakers apply a scientifically formulated framework in interaction is an element of usage that needs further explanation.

The formula devised to measured the weightiness of a FTA is another such constructed etic, and is perhaps most difficult to intuitively imagine being carried out by a speaker. Watts (2003:96) points out that, to calculate the value of Rx, the values of P and D must already been known, as how considerable the imposition is perceived to be depends largely upon the intimacy and power differences of the interlocutors. The three variables therefore can not be considered on a par, as the formula would suggest. Also, although a FTA measurement between some form of qualitative parameters will result from the formula, it will be impossible to ascertain which variable most contributed to the weightiness. This is problematic, as a substantial difference in power relations between the conversation's participants may call for a different choice of FTA redress than a large emotional distance.

Further criticisms that have been cited against the B&L model target its apparent neglect of impoliteness. The theory repeatedly refers to different forms of 'politeness', yet inherently takes this as synonymous to 'polite' rather than regarding it as a scale spanning both kinds of behaviour. Both Lakoff (1989:102) and Kasper (1990:208) include some kind of rude behaviour in their definitions of politeness, with Kasper distinguishing between three categories: 'lack of affect control', 'strategic rudeness' and 'ironic rudeness'. By neglecting one end of the politeness scale it is arguable that the model is incomprehensive. As Eelen affirms, the two concepts are too intrinsically linked to discount:

The phenomena are merely two sides of the same coin, and therefore any theory that pretends to say something valuable about one side, automatically needs to deal with the other side as well. (2001:92)

However, it may argued that although the model explicitly deals with politeness, B&L do take into account impoliteness by allowing the option of a FTA without redressive action. Taken alone FTAs in themselves are impolite, and so by not attempting to mitigate this rudeness, impoliteness can be characterised as a non-act, making it ontologically equal and opposite to politeness. Essentially though, B&L never claimed to devise a formula for impoliteness, but repeatedly and explicitly claimed to be looking at polite behaviour. Their theory goes into such depth at one end of the politeness continuum that it is difficult to imagine the scale of a theory that would also accommodate the opposite end in equivalent detail. Therefore, although impoliteness is neglected, the model can still be considered, by theorists such as Holmes and Lane, to go much further than to 'pretend' to say something valuable.

Culpeper (1996) observed this apparent inequality in the model and devised his own to reflect impoliteness, in a counterpart of B&L's. As with Lakoff, Kasper and Eelen, Culpeper regards politeness and impoliteness as inseparable, metaphorically characterising impoliteness as 'very much the parasite of politeness' (1996:355). In his paper, appearing nearly twenty years after B&L's publication, he investigates strategies 'orientated towards attacking face', echoing the five super-strategies but changing the purposes behind them to attack face rather than mitigate (1996:350). He upholds the use of the formula, but devises his own possible linguistic realizations of these strategies, in opposition to those for politeness. By aligning his model so closely to B&L's, Culpeper demonstrates its influence and the value of its principal assertions. It attempts to demonstrate that impoliteness can be accommodated by theories of face, simply different categorisations and acknowledgement of motives are needed.

In conjunction then, B&L's and Culpeper's models may be seen to comprehensively cover the linguistic field of politeness. However, despite these justifications Eelen nevertheless argues, once again concerning a fundamental premise, that B&L's explanation of impoliteness is impossible due to their use of 'face'. As the function of politeness is largely to protect face-wants, the speaker can only satisfy their wants by being considerate of those of others. In light of this idea deliberate impoliteness results in behaviour that is surely unnatural as it is detrimental to the self:

If face-wants were to account for impoliteness in the same way as politeness, they would need to include the want not to satisfy one's own face-wants, which is a contradiction in terms. As such, impoliteness cannot be a consequence of face-wants. Although Brown and Levinson do acknowledge that face-wants can be ignored…this does not dispel with the fact that want *qua wants* can never explain their own non-fulfilment. (2001:101-2)

Culpeper's model avoids this criticism to some extent by examining motivations for impoliteness, such as a power difference causing damage to the addressee's yet not the speaker's face, or mock impoliteness not earnestly intended. However, the idea still applies that purposeful impoliteness is self-damaging in theories concerning face and therefore not logical.

Alongside neglect of impoliteness perhaps the other most commonly discussed criticism of B&L's framework is its ethnocentricity. It is claimed that the model aims to 'account for the observed cross-cultural similarities in the abstract principles which underlie

polite usage' (B&L, 1987:57). B&L attempted to demonstrate this by analysing first-hand tape-recorded data from three diverse languages; English, Tzeltal (a Mayan language) and South Indian Tamil. However, what exactly is meant by the term 'culture' in never fully explicated, and is used to apply to geographical entities such as 'Westerners', ethnic divisions such as 'New York Blacks', gender groups, languages, and social classes (Eelen, 2001:160). Holmes' (1995) research has already shown that men's language adheres more closely to the B&L model than women's in New Zealand and, as this essay will shortly discuss, other research suggests that not all nationalities concur to these politeness strategies and notions of face. By having such a diverse and never fully elucidated definition of culture, B&L make vague the boundaries of their framework.

Like Holmes, many researchers have tested the universality of B&L's framework in alternative countries, such as Matsumoto (1988) and Ide (1989), who separately carried out substantial investigations into Japanese politeness. Matsumoto outlines some of the differences he perceives between the Westernised culture from which he considers the model to stem and Japanese culture:

> What is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others. Loss of face is associated with the perception by others that one has not comprehended and acknowledged the structure and hierarchy of the group. The Japanese concepts of face, thus, are qualitatively different from those defined as universals by Brown and Levinson. (1988:405)

This would indicate that negative face in particular is in question, as with more emphasis placed on interdependency and the collective, the desire to not be impeded by others is overruled by the want to maintain group dynamics. Hence the knowledge of cultural norms is valued over competent FTA redress. Ide echoes this view as she summaries:

> People in a culture choose strategies of politeness according to the cultural expectation and requirement. (1989:23)

The conclusions of this research into Japanese politeness, therefore, is at direct odds to B&L's assertion of universal strategies. However, Matsumoto and Ide are equally not without their critics. Although she does not align herself to B&L's model on all its levels, Pizziconi (2003) re-analysed the same data as used in studies by Matsumoto and Ide but forms an opposing conclusion:

> Clearly, cultures will show rather different orientations with respect to interaction norms…Yet, any of these options requires an estimation of how close one can get to others (and others' domains of rights, dispositions, etc.) and how involved, appreciative, etc. one needs to show oneself to be in order to function competently and successfully in a specific social context. An individual's underlying ideology, attitudes, or disposition, even ideas of self, are assessed via the orientations shown with regard to one's own and others' positive and negative aspects of face. (2003:1499)

Pizziconi argues here that even though, as claimed by Matsumoto and Ide, Japanese interaction emphasizes the collective over the individual, an awareness of positive and negative face will be needed to use interactional rules appropriately. B&L make a similar

claim themselves in their introduction, that although 'culturally specific usages' will vary, the underlying principles are universal (1987:57). Such a view would suggest that while the strategy realisations may differ across societies, the concept of face in interaction is applicable to all cultures. The speaker's valuation of their position in the group and the use of politeness strategies to uphold its structure, still shows a degree of recognition for face needs and FTA redress. A conclusion to the debate seems dependent upon the interpretation of these 'culturally specific usages', and how broad this meaning can be taken to be before out-ranging the boundaries of the framework.

Suggesting certain prevalent underlying principles of politeness across cultures is a contentious concept. Similarly, on a more individual level, proposing that certain behaviour is categorically polite or impolite and that all hearers will agree is another dubious generalisation. In this respect B&L's model can be accused of being predictive, as it forecasts hearer's evaluations, such as presuming a non-redressed FTA will cause offence. By characterising politeness as a facet of speaker behaviour, the speech act will always proceed the evaluation by the addressee and so must necessarily predict it in order to judge the weightiness of a threat. Arundale (2006) terms this type of speaker-orientated model one of encoding and decoding, where the speaker encodes a meaning within their utterance which the hearer must then decode, and outlines its limitations:

> Encoding/decoding models are pervasive in linguistics and assumes that the appropriate units of analysis in studying communication are the monadic individual, as well as the single isolated utterance…The Western preoccupation with individual as the central factor in explaining human activity could not be more evident. (2006:195)

Alongside the argument for the model's ethnocentricity, the accusation of being essentially predictive, provides additional affirmation for the assertion that too much emphasis is placed on the individual speaker rather than the group's interaction as a whole and how utterances are situated within it. Clearly, the more the data analysis takes into account group communication in excess of two utterances, the more it will come into contact with cultural norms, which will lessen its universality. Looking at individual speaker intention on a micro level may seem to concentrate the theory on human behaviour, but it can be argued that this is no longer an account of human communication, but perhaps human cognition or simply a theory of face.

Overall, this essay has explored the prominent arguments made against the B&L model, targeting its claims and principles. Its aim of accounting for polite behaviour has been disputed through accusations of neglecting impoliteness and not fully elucidating the conversion from the theory into emic practice. The model's aim of illustrating universality has also sustained condemnation, with the leading criticism arguing that it is ethnocentric and essentially predictive. However, through demonstrating the model's uses as a sociolinguistic tool and a basis for a subsequent model of impoliteness, this essay also suggests that the framework has, to some degree, achieved what is was specifically designed to do. It not only accounts for what happens in polite behaviour, but it also attempts to explain why this behaviour occurs with the notion of face. Pizziconi's argument illustrates that the fundamental principle of face underlies all human interaction, despite cultural differences such as strategy realisations, therefore achieving B&L's original aims.

Although many questions have been asked of the model and its definitions criticised, the fact that such a substantial amount of research has been devoted to its discussion illustrates its influence and the impact it has had on sociolinguistics. Particularly, it is interesting to remark upon the dates of research cited in this essay, the most recent of which

is Arundale (2006). From its original formulation in 1978, the model is still in contention and use nearly thirty years later. This fact alone demonstrates its influence and the usefulness it has had in raising the issue of politeness and sparking further debate and research.

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