



Website context: Learning from internationalisation → Teaching Strategies

Communication and the roles of politeness and face

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Overview

This paper outlines a theoretical perspective on a common everyday experience most people would be able to identify in the work situation: that of "face" and the role of politeness. People present an identity with positive social value and seek this to be validated by other people. However, in the presence of others, we are sometimes exposed to "face-threatening actions" which may include impositions or criticisms. To maintain face, we engage in face-work which helps to maintain each others' identities through communication. Based on observations of three language cultures, Brown and Levinsonⁱ outline a typology of linguistic politeness strategies which are usefully remembered when interacting with cultural difference.

Politeness strategies

According to Brown and Levinson (1978)ⁱⁱ politeness strategies are developed in order to save 'face':

...face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such a cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61)

Being regarded as polite is achieved by maintaining, or when under threat, saving desired or conventionally valued aspects of others' face. They define two types of 'face', and consider acts that threaten face:

Positive face is defined as every person's want to have his/her public self-image appreciated, understood, liked, approved of and ratified by others.

Negative face, on the other hand, is seen as every person's want to be free from imposition and distraction, to have his/her territory respected and his/her freedom of action unimpeded by others.

face-threatening acts are strategies that can damage or threaten another person's positive or negative face.

While positive and negative face wants exist in every individual and are present in most societies, different cultures tend to place different emphasis on one of the two aspects of face. Speakers employ various types of face threat mitigation strategies to reduce the impact on face. Strategies identified by Brown and Levinson include positive politeness (emphasizing approval of the hearer), negative politeness (emphasizing the hearer's freedom of action, e.g., via a suggestion) and off-record statements (indirect statements that imply that an action is needed). In a study exploring the use of politeness in online communications, Burke and Kraut (2008: 2)ⁱⁱⁱ identify actual strategies associated with both negative and positive politeness:

Negative politeness strategies:

- Be conventionally indirect
- Question, hedge
- Be pessimistic
- Minimise the imposition
- Give deference
- Apologize
- Impersonalise the speaker and hearer
- State the face threatening action as a general rule
- Nominalise
- Go on record as incurring a debt

Positive politeness strategies:

- Notice, attend to the hearer's needs
- Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy
- Intensify interest to the hearer
- Use in-group identity markers
- Seek agreement
- Avoid disagreement
- Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
- Joke
- Assert/presuppose knowledge of hearer's concerns
- Offer, promise
- Be optimistic
- Include both speaker and hearer in activity
- Give or ask for reason
- Assume or assert reciprocity
- Give gifts to the hearer

In any situation the first decision is whether or not a face threatening act is to take place. A face-threatening act can damage another person's positive or negative face. If not, the speaker will say nothing. If a face-threatening act needs to take place, there are four possibilities according to Brown and Levinson (1978):

1. To perform the face-threatening act *on record* without any redress: the speaker expresses his/her utterance baldly, with little or no concern for face.
2. To perform the face-threatening act using *positive politeness* strategies: with redress directed to the addressee's positive face, which appeals to the hearer's desire to be liked and be approved of.
3. To perform the face-threatening act using *negative politeness* strategies: with redress towards the hearer's negative face which appeals to the hearer's desire not to be impeded or to be left free to act as he/she chooses.
4. To perform the face-threatening act using *off record* strategies: the speaker expresses his/her utterance ambiguously (formulated as a hint, for instance), and its interpretation is left to the addressee. Such strategy is used when the risk of loss of face is great but not too great as absolutely to prohibit the face threatening act.

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ⁱ Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ⁱⁱ Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1978) "Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena" in Goody, E. (ed.), *Questions and Politeness*, Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, pp. 56-289.

ⁱⁱⁱ Burke, M. and Kraut, R. (2008) "Mind Your Ps and Qs: The Impact of Politeness and Rudeness in Online Communities" CSCW'08 November 8-12 San Diego, California, USA. <<http://www.thoughtcrumbs.com/publications/328-burke.pdf>> Accessed: 12 October 2009.