

## **Linguistic Politeness Theory Review: Yueguo Gu, Sachiko Ide, Shoshena Blum Kulka, Bruce Frasher and William Nolen, Hornst Arndt and Richard Janney**

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**Abstract.** Linguistic politeness has occupied a central place in the social study of language; even it has been the subject of intensive debate in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. A lot of linguistic scholars have carried out studies on linguistic politeness in a wide range of cultures. As a result, several theories have been proposed on linguistic politeness and have been established as scholarly concept. The major aim of this paper is to review the literature on linguistic politeness as a technical term. It will present some of the most widely used models of linguistic politeness in literature. It also tries to gloss the basic tenets of different theoretical approaches, the distinctive features of one theory versus another.

**Key words:** politeness principle, Gricean maxims, Brown Levinson's theory of politeness, Lakoff's pragmatic competence, a face-threatening act, Leech's theory of politeness, a universal Model Person, Leech's central model of PP

### **Introduction**

Linguistic politeness has occupied a central place in the social study of language; even it has been the subject of intensive debate in sociolinguistics and pragmatics. A lot of linguistic scholars have carried out studies on linguistic politeness in a wide range of cultures. As a result, several theories have been proposed on linguistic politeness and have been established as scholarly concept. The major aim of this paper is to review the literature on linguistic politeness as a technical term. It will present some of the most widely used models of linguistic politeness in literature. It also tries to gloss the basic tenets of different theoretical approaches, the distinctive features of one theory versus another.

### **Yueguo Gu' Theory of Politeness**

In Chinese society politeness is rooted from philosophers such as Confucius (during Zhou Dynasty) and Dai Sheng (during West Han dynasty dated back to 1100) who tend to pursuit knowledge motivated by moral or/and political goals. Confucius lived at a time when social chaos reigned and he aimed to restore the social order and stability of the Zhou Dynasty, which he regarded as an ideal social model. The behavioral precepts were intended to restore this social order and

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stability.

The term that comes closest to politeness in Chinese is *limao*. It is a compound of *li* (ceremony, courtesy, etiquette) and *mao* (appearance). It is defined as a code of conduct, which stipulates how one should conduct oneself not only in public but also at all times.

Thus, it explicitly connects with moral societal norms or moral maxims, the breach of which will incur social sanction. *Limao* comprises four basic constituents: respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth and refinement. Gu's framework of politeness is based on Leech's, but with a revision of the status of the PP and its associated maxims. For Chinese, the PP is thus regarded as "a sanctioned belief that an individual's behavior ought to live up to the expectations of respectfulness, modesty, attitudinal warmth, and refinement" (Gu in Eelen, 2001: 10). His framework consists of maxims with the addition of a moral component. Behavior that follows the maxims is interpreted as polite while not abiding by them results in impoliteness. In Gu's four maxims are discussed: self-denigration (denigrate self and elevate other), address, tact, and generosity. The self denigration maxim admonishes the speaker to 'denigrate self and elevate other'. The address maxim says, "address your interlocutor with an appropriate address term", where appropriateness indicates the hearer's social status, role, and the speaker-hearer relationship.

### **Sachiko Ide' Theory of Politeness**

Ide sees politeness as basically involved in maintaining smooth communication. The component of politeness: volition and discernment. Violation, speaker's strategic choice of linguistic expression, involves strategies or maxims that speaker utilizes in order to linguistically polite, making the hearer feels good. Thus it is part of language users' everyday concept of politeness, since speakers use it in order to be polite. Violation involves the speaker's free choice of verbal strategies. Discernment or *wakimae* is the ability to discern the correct form of behavior. The rules of discernment are integral part of speaking Japanese; they are part of the structure of Japanese language. Thus it is part of polite behavior because it involves socio-culturally determined grammatical choices. It is automatic socially appropriate behavior. Ide's development of discernment is based on the Japanese use of honorific forms. The use of honorific form is said to be absolute because it is not relative to the speaker's free will and because it directly indexes socio-cultural characteristic of speaker and hearer. This use of honorifics is then coupled with a view of polite as determined by social convention, which is expressed by the Japanese term *wakimae*. To behave according to *wakimae* is to show verbally one's sense of place or role in a given situation according to social conventions. In other words, the Japanese politeness forms have been largely grammaticalised. As a result that unless the speaker is able to discern the degree of politeness

required in any given situation in accordance with *wakimae*, it is impossible for him/her to produce a grammatically correct utterance. There are four conventional rules that have been identified: (1) Be polite to a person of a higher social position; (2) Be polite to a person with power; (3) Be polite to an older person; and (4) Be polite in a formal setting determined by the factors of participants, occasions, or topics.

### **Shoshana Blum-Kulka's Theory of Politeness**

Blum-Kulka also characterizes politeness as something external, hypocritical and non-natural. This negative qualification is associated with the view of politeness as an outward mask. It is an insincere performance delivered for the sake of displaying good manners or the possibility of manipulative use of politeness (e.g. saying one thing while meaning or trying to achieve something completely different). In this case the qualification of behavior as polite would be sincere and negative at the same time. The hearer would indeed consider the speaker to have behaved politely, but the fact that he/she would be evaluated negatively, for example, if the hearer preferred sincerity in the speaker's expression of opinion. According to her, system of politeness manifests a culturally filtered interpretation of the interaction between four essential parameters: social motivation, expression modes, social differentials, and social meanings. Social motivation refers to the reason why people are polite, i.e. to the functionality of politeness. Social differences refer to the parameters of situational assessment that play a role in politeness and social meaning to the politeness value of specific linguistic expressions in specific situational contexts. Cultures set the values of all these parameters through conventional rules. The rules take the form of cultural scripts that people rely on to determine the appropriateness of a specific verbal strategy in a specific context. Blum-Kulka maintains that there are two terms in used in Modern Hebrew that are equivalent to politeness: *nimus* and *adivut*. *Nimus* is frequently used in formal aspect of social etiquette where as *adivut* is used to express considerateness and an effort to accommodate to the addressee. She also makes an interesting distinction between politeness in public and in the private sphere. She suggests that complaints about lack of consideration, deplorable public service, and lack of individual restraint in public places indicate the lack of clear conventions for politeness as a social cultural code. Within the sphere of the family, however, there is a cultural notion of *lefergen* which means roughly to indulge, to support, not to be grudge and which has positive values such as the expression of love and gratitude.

### **Bruce Fraser and William Nolen's Theory of Politeness**

Fraser and Nolen view politeness as Conversational Contract. Social contract describes a fixed set of rights and obligations to which the conversational partners have to submit. When people enter into a certain conversation, each participant brings a set of rights and obligations that determine what

the participant can expect from each other. This interpersonal ‘contract’ is not static but can be revised in the course of the time. The rights and obligations of each participant are termed as the contract which are established on 4 dimensions: conventional, institutional, situational, and historical. They assume that there is a conversational contract operating in Gricean terms. To be polite is to abide by the rules of the relationship. Thus, politeness means abiding by the rules or terms of the relationship, and this emphasizes on practices that are socially appropriate. Politeness is neither involved with any form of strategic interaction nor with making the hearer feel good. It is simply getting on with the terms and conditions of the CC. Politeness is not seen as an intrinsic characteristic of certain linguistic forms nor verbal choices. Although it is acknowledged that certain verbal choices such as *sir, I’m sorry, would you please*, etc. by virtue of their intrinsic meanings can convey about hearer’s status, and these are characterized as deference. However, they are not intrinsically polite, but merely forms of status-giving, whose politeness depends on how they abide by the terms of CC that are in effect at any specific moment. In their view no sentence is inherently polite or impolite. From the epistemological foundation of Fraser and Nolen’s approach, we could conclude that politeness is a matter of remaining within the terms and conditions of the conversational contract; impoliteness, therefore, consists of violating them. Staying within the terms of the CC is said to be the norm and is related to the notion of rationality. It is what every rational participant usually does by default. As normal interaction proceeds within the term of CC, politeness mostly passes by unnoticed, while impoliteness is marked.

Here we can see that Fraser and Nolen go further to incorporate the notion of impoliteness, in that they explicitly define it as the violation of the terms of the CC. Anyhow, the ultimate power over the (im)politeness lies within the hearer. The focus is thus always on the activities of the speaker rather than those of the hearer.

(Im)politeness results from the speaker’s staying within or deviating from the terms of CC, no matter how much the speaker aims for polite behavior, the hearer can always interpret it as impolite. However, there are no inherently (im)polite linguistic choices because what will be evaluated as (im)polite depends on the specific terms of the CC between any speaker and hearer at any specific time in the interaction.

### **Horst Arndt and Richard Janney’s Theory of Politeness**

Arndt and Janney have developed an approach towards politeness from the early 1980s. In earlier works they make a distinction between social politeness and interpersonal politeness. Social politeness refers to “standardized strategies for getting gracefully into, and back out of recurring social situation”, for example, strategies for initiating, maintaining, and terminating conversation. It is

linked to traffic rules—socially appropriate communicative forms, norms, routines, rituals, etc.—which regulate appropriate and inappropriate ways of speaking. Thus, their function is, smoothing the flow of communication interaction. The locus of these rules is the society, not the language itself. In later work, they elaborate the theory of interpersonal politeness, which is captured under the new label ‘tact’. Tact is somewhat expanded notion of supportiveness, in that it is not only linked to positive but also to negative face. They suggest that tact is quite another phenomenon, with different functions in human interaction. Tact here is seen from a normative perspective. It is equated with the mutual concern for maintaining face during interaction. Since normal behavior implies that we give one another mutual support in social interaction. This work is said to be interpersonal, because it focuses on the people (not society) as the locus in determining factor of politeness. Arndt and Janney also discuss politeness in its relation to face. They borrow Brown and Levinson’s definition of face as ‘wants for autonomy and social approval’ and claim that interpersonal supportiveness consists of the protection of the interpersonal face. In this case their term of interpersonal face more or less coincides with Brown and Levinson’s positive face. A supportive speaker smoothes over uncomfortable situations, or keeps situations from becoming interpersonally uncomfortable, by constantly acknowledging his partner’s intrinsic worth as a person. He/she does this by verbally, vocally, and kinetically conforming his partner’s claim to a positive self-image. He/she attempts to minimize personal territorial transgressions and maximize signs of interpersonal approval. In terms emotive cues, interpersonal supportiveness stipulates that positive messages have to be accompanied by displays of confidence and involvement in order to avoid creating the impression that they are not positive enough (e.g. covert threat to face). And negative messages have to be accompanied by displays of lack of confidence and uninvolved in order to avoid creating the impression that they are too negative (e.g. overt threat to face). The intersection of the distinction between positive and negative messages and between supportiveness with the notion of face gives rise to four different strategies for face-work, which can be pictured as in figure below. This shows that only interpersonally supportive strategies are said to constitute politeness, since they are the only ones that acknowledge the hearer’s interpersonal face needs. Arndt and Janney’s Strategies of Face Work

Arndt and Janney’s Strategies of Face Work

Emotive strategies	Hearer’s Face Needs	
	Personal need for autonomy	Interpersonal need for social acceptance
Supportive positive	Acknowledges	Acknowledges
Non-supportive	Acknowledges	Threatens
Positive	Threatens	Acknowledges
Supportive Negative	Threatens	Threatens
Non-Supportive		
negative		

(Ellen, 2001: 16; Watts, 2003: 75)

**Conclusion**

Brown and Levinson have stated that politeness is universal feature of language use. Thus, it has occupied a central place in the social study of language, especially in pragmatics. This also has attracted many scholars to investigate the phenomena of linguistic politeness in a wide range of cultures. The investigations have yielded a number of theories or conceptions on politeness. The corollary is that the notion on politeness has received different definitions and interpretations. Some of the most widely used models of linguistic politeness in literature are those proposed by Robin Lakoff, Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson, Geoffrey Leech, Yueguo Gu, Sachiko Ide, Shoshena Blum Kulka, Bruce Fraser and William Nolen, and Hornst Arndt and Richard Janney.

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