

Appropriating Politeness Theory for Intercultural Communication in ELT

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Abstract

The theory of politeness suggests strategies in social interaction by which a person can use to save the hearer's face upon the effect of face-threatening acts or FTAs. Face threatening acts are described by Brown and Levinson as the acts that infringe the hearer's need of maintaining his/her self-esteem and be respected. Brown and Levinson accepted that the notion of face is respected as universal norms or values subscribed to by the members of the society. In that regard, this article provides a discussion about various viewpoints on the debate of universality of politeness theory and criticisms addressed by east-pragmaticists that this theory should not be seen as universally applicable. Cultural differences, as suggested by non-western pragmaticists, accord what is accepted in the context of face in western culture to be not accepted in other cultures. Therefore, although we accept that Brown & Levinson's theory has made significant breakthrough in elaborating politeness, appropriation of this theory should be accounted in intercultural communication instead to accept it as universal.

Abstrak

Teori kesopanan memberikan berbagai bentuk strategi dalam interaksi sosial dengan mana seseorang dapat menggunakannya untuk untuk menjaga imej (muka) lawan bicaranya sehingga terbebas dari ancaman Face thretening act (FTA). Tindakan mengancam wajah (face) dijelaskan oleh Brown dan Levinson sebagai tindakan-tindakan yang melanggar keinginan si lawan bicara, dalam konteks menjaga harga diri dan hasrat untuk dihormati. Brown dan Levinson berargumen bahwa konsep "face" berlaku universal yang dianggap sebagai norma-norma atau nilai-nilai yang dianut oleh anggota-anggota masyarakat. Merujuk terhadap beragam pemahaman tersebut, tulisan ini mengangkat diskusi tentang keberagaman pendapat tentang universalitas teori kesopanan Brown dan Levinson dan juga berbagai kritik terhadap teori ini oleh para pragmaticist non-barat. Perbedaan budaya, sebagaimana yang disarankan oleh ahli pragmatik non-Barat, dapat membuat hal-hal yang yang dianggap wajar dalam konteks "face" dalam budaya barat untuk tidak berlaku dalam konteks budaya lain. Karena demikian, dengan adanya teori Brown & Levinson yang telah membuat terobosan yang signifikan dalam menguraikan kesopanan dalam uraian pragmatik, sangatlah bijak bila teori ini disesuaikan untuk komunikasi antar budaya, bukannya menerimanya sebagai teori yang universal.

Key Words: Effective Communication, Politeness Theory, Face.

INTRODUCTION

Human uses communication to perform their social activity. Communication is only possible if it is performed using language, a medium by which interactants use to express and receive ideas, thoughts and feelings. The way human communicate is very complex. Even it is quite arguably, the claim to completely reveal how human communication works is still not acceptable. Communication is needed people must coordinate with others in order to understand and to be understood¹. In order to be understood, a language user must have the ability of managing speeches (also in written text) strategically to meet their goals. Among the strategies in communication is the strategy of politeness.

Politeness theory² is a comprehensive framework developed in order to understand how interpersonal concerns motivate many aspects of language use. The politeness theory is considered as an important key notion in the area of pragmatics and discourse. Politeness theory was developed after the pioneering study conducted by Robin Lakoff³, whom linking the politeness with the work developed by Paul Grice⁴ on conversational implicatures on how interactants adhere to co-operative principles to achieve successful communication. The study has given lots of insights and stimulated many other studies that analyze the way people interacts using social psychological approach to language use.

This essay is intended to analyze what are the advantages and the disadvantages of the theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson in intercultural communication context. In the following section of the essay, I will start with the description the key notions and terminologies used in the Politeness theory. Later I will describe how the Brown and Levinson's politeness theory become heavily debated in the last three decades and what the contentions of the debates are. Finally, I will discuss the advantages and the disadvantages based on

¹Holtgraves, T, *Language as Social Action: Social Psychology and Language Use*, Mahwah, N.J.; London: Erlbaum, 2002.

²Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

³ Lakoff, R. T., The logic of Politeness: Minding Your Ps and Gs. *Chicago Linguistics Society*, 9, 1973.

⁴ Grice, P., Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech acts*. New York: Academic Press, 1975. Reprinted in A. Jaworski and N. Coupland (eds), *The discourse reader*, London: Routledge, 1999.

studies that had been conducted along its development. In addition to that, I will discuss how in my view that the notion of politeness can be applicable in teaching English in my ELT context.

Key terminologies in Politeness Theory

Politeness is defined by Geoffrey Leech⁵ as “a form of behavior that establishes and maintains comity.” In another words, politeness is referring to the ability of the people in a social interaction to engage in communication with relative harmony. Politeness is a form of social interaction conditioned by socio-cultural norms of the particular society, which can be expressed through communication and communicative acts.⁶

Another key notion related to politeness is the ‘face.’ Face is the notion that represents the individual self-esteem, which is something being emotionally invested, can be lost, maintained, and enhanced that constantly attended the interaction. The notion was initially introduced by Goffman⁷ as a metaphor of a mask of a person that changes according to the audience and the kinds of social interaction that the person engaged in.

The theory of politeness suggest the strategies in social interaction by which a person can use to save the hearer’s face upon the effect of face-threatening acts or FTAs.⁸ Face threatening acts (FTA) are described by Brown and Levinson as the acts that infringe the hearer’s need of maintaining his/her self-esteem and be respected. In this light, face maintenance is considered as a condition rather than the goal of interaction. Brown and Levinson argues that anthropologist would possibly use the notion of face respected as norms or values subscribed to by the members of the society. However, instead, they suggest face as wants. Brown and Levinson identify two types of face, they are: negative face and positive face. Negative face refers to “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his action

⁵Geoffrey Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics*, London: Longman, 1983.

⁶Alfatah, M. H. A., *Pragmatic Analysis of Politeness Theory, Language in India, Vol. 10, 2010*, pp. 133-157.

⁷Goffman, E., *Interaction ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*. N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967.

⁸Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. p. 61

be unimpeded by others” and positive face refers to the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others⁹.

Brown and Levinson suggest five politeness strategies that can become the speakers’ choice, namely, without redressive action (bald on record strategy), with positive politeness, with negative politeness, by going off record, and by not doing the face threatening act¹⁰. The following figure illustrates how the choices of strategy are classified.

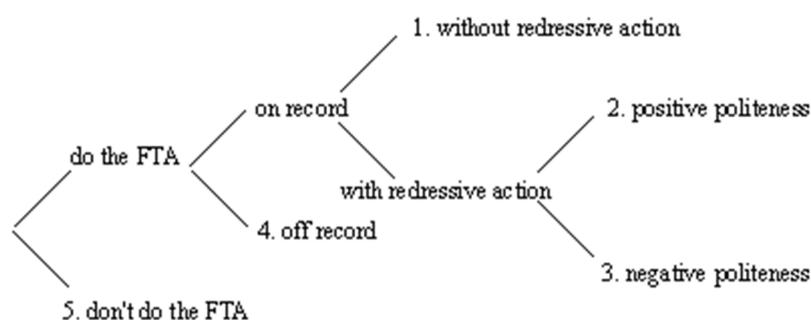


Figure 1. Choice of strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 60)

Bald on record strategy is used when the speaker has no intension to lessen the threats to the hearer’s face. The speaker uses bald on record strategy in order to get the maximum efficiency in communication. The strategy is in conformity with Grice’s maxims¹¹ in which adhering to the maxim to quality by being non-spurious; adhering to maxim quantity by saying as required; adhering to the maxim of relevance by being relevant; and adhering to the maxim of manner by avoiding ambiguity and obscurity.

Bald on record strategy is differentiated by two cases of uses, they are “the case of non-minimization of the face threat”¹², where the intention is to gain maximum efficiency is the main importance. This case can be found in cases such as: (1) great urgency and desperation such as yelling for help in emergency situation; (2) cases of task oriented interaction as in ordering the hearer to help

⁹Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...* p. 62.

¹⁰Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...* p. 60

¹¹Grice, Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech acts*. New York: Academic Press, 1975. Reprinted in A. Jaworski and N. Coupland (eds), *The discourse reader*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 238.

¹²Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*, p. 95.

lifting a heavy material by asking one to hold the other end; (3) Interaction in noisy environment is also classified into this category, where the only importance is the hearer can hear what the speaker says. (4) Cases where the speaker's wants to satisfy the Hearer's face is small, either because the speaker is powerful or the speaker does not fear the non-cooperation of the hearer. Such cases can be found in such interaction between a person with his/her apprentice; (5) cases when the speaker wants to be rude without worrying the risk of offending; (6) cases when the speaker wants to give a sympathetic advice and warnings; (7) and cases when speaker is granting permission for something that the hearer requested. Another set uses of bald on record strategy is in the cases of FTA-oriented bald on record usage. This strategy is actually oriented to the face that illustrates the way in which respect for face involves mutual orientation such as in greetings, offers, and welcoming.

Positive politeness strategy is used in interaction where the speaker wants sacrifice his/her positive face in order to express closeness and friendliness, by showing interest as if the hearer needs to be respected. This strategy is commonly found in a group of people who knows each other very well. There are 15 strategies for this category, they are:

1. Notice, attend to Hearer (his interests, wants, needs, goods).
2. Exaggerate (interest approval, sympathy with Hearer)
3. Intensify interest to Hearer
4. Use in-group identity markers
5. Seek agreement
6. Avoid disagreement
7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
8. Joke
9. Assert or presuppose Speaker's knowledge of and concern for Hearer's wants.
10. Offer, promise.
11. Be optimistic
12. Include both Speaker and Hearer in the activity
13. Give (or ask for) reasons
14. Assume or assert reciprocity
15. Give gifts to Hearer (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

Negative politeness strategy is used in when the person wants to have his freedom of action unobstructed and his attention unrestricted¹³. It is a redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face. There are 10 strategies of negative politeness, which are:

1. Be conventionally indirect.
2. Question, hedge.
3. Be pessimistic.
4. Minimize imposition
5. Give difference
6. Apologize
7. Impersonalize Speaker and Hearer
8. State the Face Threatening Act as general rule
9. Nominalize
10. Go on record as incurring debt, or as not indebting Hearer

Another politeness strategy is the **off the record strategy**. This strategy is particularly done with an off-record communicative act "in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act"¹⁴. This strategy enables the speaker to convey his/her intention by avoiding the responsibility of doing the FTA and leave to the hearer to decide the interpretation. There are 15 strategies in this category, they are:

1. Give hints
2. Give association clues
3. Presuppose
4. Understate
5. Overstate
6. Tautologies
7. Contradictions
8. Be ironic
9. Use metaphors
10. Use rhetorical questions
11. Be ambiguous
12. Be vague
13. Over-generalize
14. Displace H
15. Be incomplete, use ellipsis

¹³Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*

¹⁴Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*, p. 211.

Perhaps, there is another strategy, as listed earlier, which is called *opting out* whereas the person decides not to do face threatening act. Not doing any face threatening act enables a person to not become engaged to any possible interaction. Therefore, the speaker would be unlikely to get any effect at all.

Discussion on the universality of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson at certain extent have been satisfactorily identifying the aspect of interaction in relation to politeness in a very detailed manner. The applicability of the model for English context is unquestionably precise and thorough. However, the claim of having the model of politeness and the model of face can be universally applicable to different culture context in later time has gain the heat of debates. The foundation of the debates is because politeness theory is developed using Anglo-Saxon perspective. According to Bargiela-Chippini:

“The Western character of their (positive and negative) face derives from an Anglo-Saxon understanding of the rational individual who seeks to protect himself or herself, and others, from Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). In spite of its claim to universality, the politeness model that stems from this characterization of face is also, inevitably, culture-biased”¹⁵.

The debate on the universality of Brown and Levinson theory was initiated by Matsumoto who claims that the universality of face of politeness theory is not applicable in the politeness phenomena in Japanese context based on the study on honorifics¹⁶. The goals of Brown and Levinson's original paper prior to the publication of Brown and Levinson's *Universal Politeness* book¹⁷ was stated as the “hope to show that superficial diversities can emerge from underlying universal principles and are satisfactorily accounted for only in relation to them” (Brown and Levinson, 1978, as cited in Matsumoto, 1988), by which they claim that the theory for politeness is universal. Matsumoto argues, among others, that the notion of ‘face’ is not applicable to the Japanese society. Matsumoto rejected the universality

¹⁵ Bargiela-Chiappini, F., Face. In J. L. Mey (Ed.), *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Elsevier, 2009, p. 261.

¹⁶Matsumoto, Y., Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 12, 1988, p. 403.

¹⁷Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*

of the politeness theory in light of the Japanese language and culture. He claims, “the object of people’s concern in conversational exchange, are dependent on the culture. Only by allowing cultural variability at this foundational point in the model can we obtain a satisfactory theory of politeness”¹⁸.

Another attack against the universality of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory was addressed by Ide that suggests an alternative theory called “discernment theory.”¹⁹ Discernment theory refers to the concept of automatic observation of socially-agreed-upon rules and applies to both verbal and non verbal behavior. The speaker is passive submit to the system (social norm). Being on the same side as Ide, Haugh and Hinze²⁰ and Haugh²¹ also refuse to use the notion of negative and positive face for Chinese, Japanese, and English, instead, proposing metalinguistic approach to replace the aforementioned notion. Metalinguistic approach, also known as metalanguage approach, uses “what A shows A thinks of B” and “what B thinks A thinks of B.” This formula suggested by Haugh and Hinze was argued applicable in any cultural context.

Nevertheless, although the counterclaim to reject and replace some (if not to say all) notion of Politeness theory was inevitably sprouting in the eastern countries, there are also some of the Asian linguists who are still advocating the universality of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness theory. Among those who are proactively involved in the debate are Fukuda and Asato²² and Pizziconi²³.

The advantages of the Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory

From the socio-pragmatic perspective, it can be accepted that the notion of face and facework is very relevant to what is being believed and applied in English context and some of the cultural contexts being studied in the development of the

¹⁸ Matsumoto, Y., Reexamination of the universality of face: Politeness Phenomena in Japanese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 12, 1988 p. 423.

¹⁹Ide, S., Formal forms and discernment: Two Neglected Aspects of Universals of Linguistic Politeness. *Multilingua*, Vol. 8, 1989, pp. 223–248.

²⁰Haugh, M., The importance of “place” in Japanese Politeness: Implications for Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Analyses, *Intercultural Pragmatics*, Vol. 2(1), 2005, pp. 41–68.

²¹Haugh, M., The importance of “place”..p. 41

²² Fukuda, A., & Asato, N., Universal Politeness Theory: The Application to The Use of Japanese Honorifics. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 36, 2004, pp. 1991-2002.

²³Pizziconi, B., Re-examining Politeness, Face and The Japanese Language. *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 35, 2003, pp. 1471–1506.

theory. The languages and the cultures involved in the study are English (British and America), Tzeltal (Mayan language spoken in Mexico), and South Indian Tamil from Tamilnadu, which are being first handedly tape-recorded as the source of the data²⁴. Therefore, the inference that can be made was that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is applicable with these languages—but perhaps, not others.

The notion “face” was originally taken from the English metaphor “face” as someone's social image. The notion of face can be regarded as obvious in the context of English culture due to English norms of the inner circle²⁵ were still being perceived by many English teachers in the periphery world as the Standard English. Therefore, what the theory suggests can be more applicable and suitable for those who are intending to engage with the Western culture. However, as the demand of global English paradigm grows, the application of politeness theory of Brown and Levinson should be appropriated into the context of the periphery cultures. Non-western cultures should be able to apply politeness from their own way instead of forcing to exactly fit the concept of face and politeness as described by this theory.

Holtgraves²⁶ adds that politeness theory has the advantage of postulating links between interpersonal variables and numerous aspects of language use. The theory was appreciated due it is truly a social psychological approach to language use. His positive view is relevant in regards of bringing conceptual picture how language use can described in such a detail and comprehensive methods. Brown and Levinson stated that the theory was made as an essay instead of an analysis; however, the presentation of the theory was in constructivism²⁷. Therefore, the theory can be respected as the standpoint where there are potential patches and development can be made in the future.

In the context of teaching learning, investigating politeness is important because second language learners experience great differences in acquiring formulaic routines so that they can present themselves in situationally appropriate ways²⁸. Most learners seek to be polite in the L2 or to be impolite, when necessary,

²⁴Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*

²⁵Kachru, B. B. *The Other Tongue: English Cross Cultures*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1983.

²⁶Holtgraves, T, *Language as Social Action...*

²⁷Brown and Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals...*

²⁸Alfatah, M. H. A., *Pragmatic Analysis of...*

in appropriate ways²⁹. English Second language learners, for example, can be taught English appropriate pragmatic expression that they can use to express their wants upon engaging with native speakers. In this light, I am certain that even for communication in English in the ESL or EFL classroom, the theory can be used as the model of task in order to teach them various ways of expressing speech act politely.

I believe that Brown and Levinson never predict that their theory can stimulate huge debate up until today. However, their contribution to explain how politeness phenomenon is created and comprehended has been considered as the theoretical base for strategies of politeness, face, and face threatening acts. What is appropriate in communication differs from a culture to another and a subculture to another subculture. Language use without regard to this difference of appropriateness can and will cause friction and conflict which is not intended by the speaker. This is where the research on linguistic politeness actor neighboring countries can provide an important service³⁰.

Apart from the contention of its inapplicability in certain culture as what has been previously discussed, O'Driscoll³¹ commented that the positive and negative faceworks can also be appropriated into culture-neutral that function as an empirical tool to examine the interaction within cultural applicability by adding other specific instrument that might differ across culture as additional assistance in face analysis.

The disadvantages of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory

As discussed earlier in this essay, the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has been rejected by a number of linguists from the Asian countries. The contention is about refusing the universality of the Politeness theory as Brown and Levinson have claimed. The reaction was that many critical

²⁹Alfattah, M. H. A., Pragmatic Analysis of...

³⁰Alfattah, M. H. A., Pragmatic Analysis of...

³¹ O'Driscoll, J. Brown & Levinson's Face: How It Can—and Can't—Help Us to Understand Interaction Across Cultures. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, Vol. 4(4), 2007, 463–492.

reevaluation of Brown and Levinson's theory on face appeared. The critical reevaluations were made by scholars from outside Anglophone world that analyzes insights from psychology, philosophy and anthropology. The criticism that was initially addressed by linguists from Asian countries has expanded to Southern Europe, South America, and South Africa³².

Paltridge points out that politeness strategies across languages and cultures are not the same and can potentially mean different things in different linguistic and cultural context³³. Lacking of understanding of politeness strategy in different languages and cultures can cause cross-cultural pragmatic failures. Brown and Levinson theory is considered to emphasize the absolutism of politeness rule. Such discouraging claim of universality is considered inappropriate. The theory was made on the basis of western culture. Although Tamil language was respected as the representation of eastern culture, it is still unacceptable to claim its universality. The claim was regarded as to force the politeness framework of the western countries to fit into the context eastern countries. Hymes further argues that "the sense of universal application invites an invisible ethnocentrism"³⁴.

CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed the key notions of Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory, the debate on regarding its claim of universality, and both its advantages and disadvantages. The theory is considered as the theoretical base for strategies of politeness, face, and face threatening acts despite of the debate centering on its universality.

Meier has provided a strong argument that "cultural assumptions and situational factors can present a complexity that can never be adequately captured by a list of cultural rules or a recipe for every, or even most, possible constellations of contextual factors". The debate should be more appropriated into the context of the intercultural communication rather than claiming and counterclaiming the issue of universality. Meier also suggests that based on the examination of some definitions, it is concluded that the notions of politeness and face should not be

³²Mey, J., *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (2nd ed.), Amsterdam; London: Elsevier, 2009.

³³Paltridge, B., *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. London; New York: Continuum, 2006.

³⁴Meier, A. J., Teaching the Universals of Politeness, *ELT Journal*, 51(1), 1997, p. 23.

equated. The Politeness theory has already provided its usefulness and it has been being repeatedly used in empirical researches despite of the discouraging words from Brown and Levinson.

In order to appropriate the concept of Politeness into multi-cultural context, Meier suggests a dynamic approach to the application of this concept, in which the learners can gain insights into cultural assumptions that underlie the perception of contextual and situational factors as they inform linguistic behavior. Because the ways in which people express politeness also differs across cultures, the teaching of politeness should account:

1. An understanding that different evaluations of appropriateness may exist across cultures, and that interpretations based on the learners' own interrelated linguistic and cultural systems may go amiss.
2. Attention to contextual factors and their possible values in the target language, so that learners can make informed choices in negotiating effective communication and in presenting their desired image in a particular context. This also develops in learners an ability to deal with the diversity that exists even within one language. The goal is thus education rather than training³⁵.

The current debate about reexamining the universality of Brown and Levinson Politeness theory should be shifted to more meaningful and applicable direction. Brown³⁶ also suggests that there should be more studies focusing to link the interest in politeness theory and the recognition of social and cultural aspect within second language learning. Therefore, the politeness theory can be developed in such a better way, appropriated, and integrated into intercultural communication in ELT according to the students' context.

³⁵Widdowson 1983, as cited in Meier, 1997, p. 25.

³⁶Brown, L., Politeness and second language learning: The case of Korean speech styles, *Journal of Politeness Research*, Vol. 6, 2010, pp. 243-269.

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