

Lecture 15 Linguistic Politeness

1. Grice's maxims of conversation don't suffice as an account of language usage. We also have to consider sociolinguistic factors such as **linguistic politeness**.
2. **Leech's Maxims of Politeness**

[see Leech (1983: 132)]

Paradox: observing modesty and agreement in the case of being praised.

The maxims of Politeness 'save' the Cooperative Principle: they show what happens in the case when it is breached.

Interpersonal Rhetoric:

[see Leech (1983: 149)]

Irony Principle (a 'dysfunctional principle', serves the purpose of 'being antisocial'):

Quality: 'That's all I wanted.'

Quantity: 'Some of his words were not Sunday school words.'

Banter Principle: 'In order to show solidarity with the hearer, say something which is (i) obviously untrue, and (ii) obviously impolite to the hearer.'

'Here comes trouble!'

Interest Principle: 'Say what is unpredictable, and hence interesting.'

'It made my blood boil.' – breach of Quality Maxim (overstatement)

'I wasn't born yesterday.' – breach of Quantity Maxim (understatement)

Pollyanna Principle: 'Be optimistic'. Participants in a conversation are said to prefer pleasant topics of conversation to unpleasant ones. -

-euphemisms

-the practice of 'minimizing evil': 'a bit', 'rather'

"... principles, being the general functional 'imperatives' of human communication, are more or less universal, but (...) their relative weights will vary from one cultural, social or linguistic milieu to another."

Leech (1983: 150)

3. **Brown & Levinson's Universal Model of Linguistic Politeness**

People are governed by two desires: to be unimpeded in actions and to be approved of (the negative politeness and the positive politeness respectively).

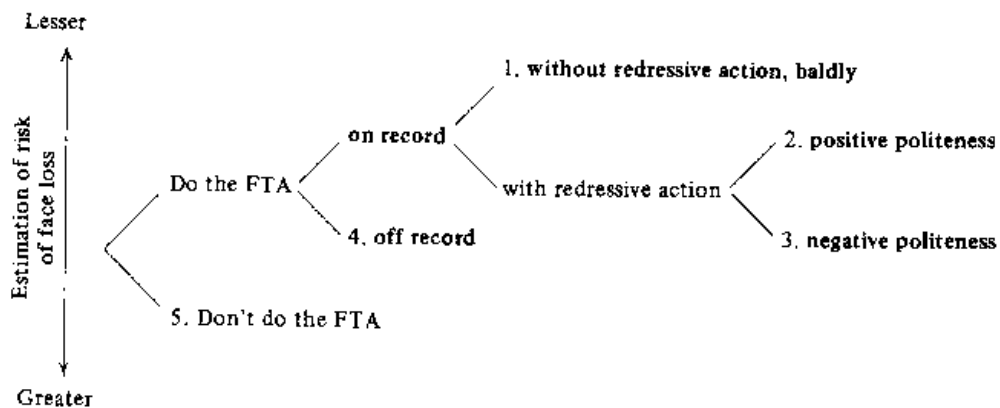
Face: the public self-image.

The negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

The positive face (personality): the desire that the person's self-image is approved of and appreciated.

There is no *faceless* communication.

Face threatening acts (FTAs):



Brown & Levinson (1987: 60)

The weightiness of the FTA:

$$W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$$

x = FTA, D = social distance between S and H , P = relative power of H over S , R_x = the degree to which the FTA is ranked as an imposition in that culture.

“... $P(H,S)$ may be assessed as being great because H is eloquent and influential, or is a prince, a witch, a thug, or a priest; $D(S,H)$ is great because H speaks another dialect or language, or lives in the next valley, or is not a kinsman.” B&L (1987: 76)

Languages: Tzeltal, Tamil, English.

Assumptions: All speakers are rational and have face (‘honour’) which they want to maintain.
Speakers want to maintain the interlocutor’s face.

The higher numbered strategies correspond to the acts that are more threatening. W_x provides the speaker with the reason to choose among the five sets of politeness strategies.

Conclusion: Interaction is based on universal principles.

FTAs:

(1) threatening the negative face: orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, warnings, offers, promises, expressions of envy, admiration, hatred, lust

(2) threatening the positive face: expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt, complaint, accusation, insult, disagreement, expressions of violent emotions, mention of taboo topics, interruption and other non-cooperation, bringing bad news about the hearer or good news about the speaker.

Some FTAs threaten both aspects of face.

Acts that threaten the speaker's own face: expressing thanks, apologising...

Going on record gives the speaker credit for honesty; the speaker is seen as trustful. Going off record gives the speaker credit for being tactful. The utterance is ambiguous, more than one intention can be attributed to it.

Going on record:

(a) Positive politeness: suggesting commonality, understanding, joint action

(b) Negative politeness: showing respect, maintaining social distance.

D1: Excuse me, would you by any chance have the time?

D2: Got the time, mate?

D1 > D2, W1 > W2 (negative politeness in 1)

P1: Excuse me sir, would it be all right if I smoke?

P2: Mind if I smoke?

P1 > P2 (negative politeness)

R1: Look, I'm terribly sorry to bother you but would there be any chance of your lending me just enough money to get a railway ticket to get home? I must have dropped my purse and I just don't know what to do.

R2: Hey, got change for a quarter?

R1 > R2, W1 > W2 (negative politeness)

4. Examples of strategies:

Bald on record (speaking in conformity with Grice's Maxims):

'Watch out!'

'Help!'

'Don't forget us!'

welcomings, farewells, offers

Positive politeness ('familiar', joking behaviour). Strategies:

- claim common ground:

'Goodness, you cut your hair! By the way, I came to borrow some flour.' (notice)

'What a fantastic garden you have!' (exaggerate)

'There were a million people in the Co-op tonight!' (intensify interest)

'Come here, mate.' (in-group identity)

'Lend us two quid, wouldja mate?' (slang, jargon)

'Got any spare cash?' (ellipsis)

'You really should sort of try harder.' (hedging opinion)

also: seek agreement, avoid disagreement, tell white lies

-convey that the speaker and the hearer are cooperators:

'Give us a break!' (include the hearer in the activity)

-fulfil the hearer's want for some X

e.g. give gifts (also verbal gifts)

Negative politeness (respectful behaviour, minimizing the imposition of the FTA).

Strategies:

-don't assume/presume: assume that the hearer is unlikely to be willing/able to do any acts predicated of him/her. Question, hedge.

Quality hedges: 'I believe that ...'

Quantity hedges: 'more or less', 'to some extent'

Relevance hedges: 'by the way', 'Oh, I've just remembered...'

Manner hedges: 'You are not exactly thrifty, if you see what I mean.'

-don't coerce the hearer: be pessimistic, give deference, minimise the imposition.

-communicate the want not to impinge on the hearer, i.e. apologise, etc.

-impersonalize the speaker and the hearer:

'It seems [~~TO ME~~] that...', 'IT IS REGRETTED that...'

Off record (the hearer can attribute more than one clear communicative intention to the act).

Strategies: metaphor, irony, understatement, rhetorical questions.

Strategies in inviting conversational implicatures:

-give hints

'It's cold in here.'

'The soup's a bit bland.'

-give association clues

'My house isn't far away...'

-presuppose

'I washed the car *again* today.' (presupposes 'before as well' and implies criticism)

-understate

'That car looks as if it might go!' (about a flashy sports car)

-overstate

'I tried to call a hundred times, but there was never any answer.'

-use tautologies

'Boys will be boys.'

-use contradictions

'John is here and he isn't here.'

-be ironic

'John is a real genius.'

-use metaphors

'Harry's a real fish.'

-use rhetorical questions

'What can I say?'

Strategies in violating the maxim of Manner:

-be ambiguous

‘John’s a pretty smooth cookie.’

-be vague

‘I’m going you-know-where.’

-overgeneralize

‘A stitch in time saves nine.’

-displace the hearer

(e. g. address a message to a third party in the presence of the intended hearer)

-be incomplete, use ellipsis

‘Well, if one leaves one’s tea on a wobbly table...’

Violation of the structure of conversation is a FTA: interrupting, ignoring selection of other speakers, not responding to prior turns, violation of opening and closing procedures.

B&L: The level of W_x is culture-specific, determined by the values of D, P and R. Different acts are FTAs in different cultures, and to a different degree.

‘Positive-politeness cultures’ and ‘negative politeness’ cultures

high values for D, R, P → hierarchical cultures

low values for D, R, P → egalitarian cultures

Strategies are not necessarily conscious (?)

Q: Is this approach likely to be applicable to all cultures?

5. Examples of alternative accounts:

- Fraser’s Politeness as Social Adequacy: politeness is a state rather than a strategy

“Politeness is a state that one expects to exist in every conversation; participants note not that someone is being polite – this is the norm – but rather that the speaker is violating the C[onversational] C[ontract]. Being polite does not involve making the hearer ‘feel good’ à la B[rown] and L[evinson]. It simply involves getting on with the task at hand in light of the terms and conditions of the CC.”

Fraser (1990: 233).

- Watts (2003) on politeness immersed in social practice understood as a dynamic process.

Suggested reading

Introductory:

Brown & Levinson 1987

Leech 1983, chs 4-6

Jaszczolt 2002, ch 15

More advanced/detailed:

Journal of Pragmatics 39, April 2007: Special Issue ‘Identity Perspectives on Face and (Im)Politeness’

Fraser 1990

Watts 2003

Wierzbicka 1991, chs 2-3