
Pragmatics and Politeness in the Second Language Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the notions of “negative” and “positive politeness” and “face” as they relate to the second language classroom. The thesis is that an analysis of these pragmatic aspects of language usage will broaden understanding of the nature of interactions between teachers and students, and will provide insights that may help the teacher with various aspects of classroom methodology. The writer uses Brown and Levinson’s *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* as a basis for a sample analysis of a class taught at Concordia University in Montreal (in-campus mini teaching), to adult refugees mostly at the beginner level. Three areas of classroom practice are examined: presentation, giving instructions, and comprehension checks. The writer concludes that his use of politeness strategies reflects white North American cultural norms, but that these strategies do not necessarily improve student language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

The field of pragmatics has been of interest to those involved in language teaching and learning for some time. Pragmatics focuses not on the semantic content of an utterance, but on the communicative goal the speaker wishes to achieve by producing the utterance. The goal or function of an utterance is known as a “speech act,” and various scholars have proposed that the infinite number of sentences we produce may in fact serve only a limited number of functions (Hatch 1992:

121). Thus, the notion of speech acts is very important in language teaching as it provides much of the theoretical groundwork for the functional language syllabus and the communicative approach to language teaching emphasized in today’s ESL classrooms.

Another important branch of pragmatics, “politeness,” deals with how speech acts affect interlocutors’ perception of “face,” a term which refers to the public self-image that we project to

the world. Face is said to consist of two aspects: "negative face," or the right to freedom of action and freedom from imposition; and "positive face," or the need to be socially approved of. Brown and Levinson (1987) propose that all speech acts are in some way face-threatening (they term these "face-threatening acts," or FTAs), and that in most cases speakers will try to remedy this situation through some formulaic use of language, called a "politeness strategy," that will reduce this face-threatening potential. The choice of strategy depends on three factors: the power differential between interlocutors; the relative social distance between interlocutors; and the ranking of impositions in a particular culture or group (for example in some cultural or social contexts you may need to be more polite when asking for something than in others). Politeness strategies are classified as negative or positive, according to whether they target negative or positive face needs.

This study is an attempt to understand how the pragmatic notion of politeness relates to the ESL classroom. Specifically, by exploring the dynamics of face in the special context of the ESL classroom, and the politeness strategies teachers use when interacting with students, I seek to discover some of the underlying assumptions teachers hold concerning relationships with students. Implicit here is the notion that "the way a person speaks will always reflect underlying assumptions about the relations of distance and power between himself and his listener" (Scollon and Scollon 1984: 170); and more importantly, that "the whole concept of identity is tied to the values assigned to [distance and power]" (Scollon and Scollon 1981: 193). This paper examines how these underlying assumptions may reflect a teacher's cultural background, and also questions how a teacher's use of politeness strategies in the classroom may enhance or diminish teaching effectiveness. Finally, it is hoped that this study may promote reflective teaching by encouraging us to look more closely at student-teacher interaction and how our cultural backgrounds affect attitudes and behaviour in class.

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Scollon and Scollon (1981) compare cross-cultural politeness systems and the assumptions of

power, distance and ranking of impositions upon which they are based. They write, "In a group that accepts or values the expression of multiple communicative roles [as in North American culture], it is possible for each role relationship to have a different system of politeness relations." Tannen (1984: 193) also notes, in her synopsis of cross-cultural pragmatics, that there is an "enormous problem, even within a culture, of figuring out what is meant by what is not said." And as Richards and Schmidt (1980: 147) emphasize, "Formulae used to realize a speech act have different meanings in [different] languages," and they go on to enumerate the various types of difficulties this problem can pose for the second language learner.

What all this means in the context of the second language classroom is that the teacher will be dealing with several competing and overlapping systems of politeness relations: (1) his own broad, culturally determined politeness system (2) his personal politeness system based on private assumptions about the world, (3) the personal and cultural politeness systems of a wide range of students and (4) the new interactional system based on the unique context of the classroom. In other words, the teacher will be dealing with a complex system of interaction among inter-cultural, intra-cultural, and dual role-related politeness systems. This web may seem overly complex at first glance, but to help us we might take into account something Scollon and Scollon point out: "What varies from system to system is the . . . values placed on different aspects of face in a particular group. Given a difference in value, the set of face universals determines different communicative strategies" (1981: 170). Thus, by exploring how a teacher's communicative politeness strategies relate to the concept of face in the second language classroom, some of his or her underlying assumptions about distance and power relationships will be revealed.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

My main base for analysis is Brown and Levinson's *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, for as Scollon and Scollon (1984: 170) put it, "Brown and Levinson's insight has been to provide us with a theoretical framework within

which we can discuss the face relations between speakers as a matter of deep assumptions about relationships that are encoded in . . . politeness strategies." In fact, all the work I have examined on politeness strategies, be it classroom-oriented or from a broader sociological perspective, uses Brown and Levinson's work as the empirical base for further research and discussion. I also use Searle's speech act schema, as presented by Hatch (1992: 121-131), as the basis for analysis of speech acts in the data examined (see Appendix One).

In terms of research dealing specifically with politeness strategies in the ESL classroom, however, I have found only one article (Banerjee and Carrell 1988), and this approaches the topic from the perspective of teaching politeness strategies to ESL learners, rather than analyzing politeness strategies used by teachers themselves. Other articles and books I have found examine politeness as part of a broader analysis of inter-cultural pragmatic phenomena or sociolinguistic concerns (Poole 1992; Kasper 1983; Richards and Schmidt 1980; Davies 1987; Tannen 1984; Scollon and Scollon 1981 and 1984). Although these works take a broader perspective on the topic than I originally hoped, they have provided me with a solid base for an examination of politeness strategies in the ESL classroom.

DATA BASE

The data are taken from an ESL class for adult refugees I taught at Concordia University in 1994 during my student-teaching internship, which is a required course for students in the B.Ed. TESL degree. Our students ranged in age from mid-twenties to late forties; in language ability from low beginner to intermediate; and were from various countries (including Morocco, Iran, Mexico, Russia, Turkey, and Hong Kong). These classes are 160 minutes long. Student teachers work in two groups of four, each student teacher giving a twenty-minute lesson. Each group is assigned a specific topic, and no additional materials are provided for the student teachers, who must collaborate to produce their own original lesson plans. As many of these student teachers are in front of a class for the first time and are being observed and evaluated by the internship profes-

sor, the atmosphere is one of general tension and nervousness.

Each internship class consists of twelve students, so that when two groups of four are teaching, the last group of four is responsible for videotaping the full 160-minute class. Thus, many videotapes of these teaching sessions are readily available for transcription. The advantage of using this material, rather than simply using audio recordings, is that relevant contextual clues can be included. In short, then, one of these video recordings was viewed and transcribed, and the subsequent transcription is used in the analysis (see Appendix Two).

PROCEDURE

The procedure is as follows. I take as my starting point three components of the normal ESL class: (1) presentation (2) giving instructions, and (3) comprehension checks. I then examine the data (using Searle's speech act schema) to see which speech acts the teacher uses in each of the above three components. Next, I discuss how these speech acts impinge on the students' negative and positive face. The teacher's use of language is then analyzed with reference to Brown and Levinson's model of politeness to see how it reflects positive and negative politeness strategies within each component of the lesson. Finally, these strategies are examined to establish what assumptions about power, distance and relative rank of impositions they presuppose, what implications these assumptions might have for teaching, and whether or not these strategies contribute to the effectiveness of the teacher's classroom practice.

ANALYSIS

1) Presentation

The presentation component of the lesson involves presenting vocabulary and utterances that will be used in communicative activities later in the class. (Although this stage also involves comprehension checks, we will leave this for the third section.) The data reveal that during the presentation stage, the predominant type of speech act is the representative. The teacher is mostly making assertions about the meaning of the phrasal verb "cut back on" and drawing analogies from

politics. This style of discourse, I think, can be face threatening in at least two ways. First, since the teacher is in the more powerful role position, the strength of his assertions could be considered a form of boasting (Brown and Levinson 1987: 67) or bringing good news about himself. The more baldly the teacher delivers his assumptions, the more he elevates himself, thus threatening the students' positive face. And second, both the teacher and students need a certain amount of approval commensurate with their roles. The teacher, for example, needs to feel that he is explaining things well enough that the students can understand him and, on the other hand, the students must feel that they are intelligent and attentive enough to understand his assertions. In the classroom context, then, there is a reciprocal need for approval intrinsic to the roles of both teacher and student. This need for mutual approval may have little to do with the representative itself, but I think that because this speech act is the main feature of the presentation stage the motive to hedge and downtone its force is certainly present, and the data do support this hypothesis in several instances.

For example, in line 6, the teacher makes a joke about the government driving limousines. This in itself is a positive politeness strategy. It is not only an attempt to ease the pressure on students and teacher alike; it is also an attempt to lessen the distance between speaker (S) and hearer (H), since this joke is based on supposed "mutual background knowledge and shared values" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 124), i.e., "everyone hates the government." Further, there are hedges put on the assertion that realizes the joke. The teacher introduces the assertion with "maybe" and finishes it with "or something." Both of these serve to lessen the positive face-threatening potential of the assertion (although the act of asserting can also be seen as a threat to negative face in that the stronger the assertion is the more burden it places on the hearer to agree with the speaker.) In fact, there is evidence of similar kinds of hedges throughout the first forty lines. The teacher is continuously using hedging particles; for example, the word "maybe" appears in lines 9, 30, 31; "say" is used in lines 7, 12, 26, 28; and the teacher uses the noun phrase "some people" in lines 30, 31 and 32 to distance himself

from the truth value of the assertions he is making.

2) *Giving instructions*

This phase of the lesson involves informing the students of the procedures to be used in the main communicative activity of the lesson, monitoring student behaviour as the activity is carried out, and providing guidance in other miscellaneous aspects of classroom procedure. The main speech act which realizes these functions is of course the directive. This speech act threatens the hearer's negative face since it predicates a future act of the hearer, thus impinging on his freedom of action. The more baldly the speaker makes the directive, the more he presumes the hearer will indeed perform the act. Baldly stated directives, then, imply that the speaker has more power over the hearer, and in order to reduce the implication of this power the speaker will take certain measures to soften the force of the directive (Brown and Levinson 1987). The data in this study reveal that the teacher uses both negative and positive politeness strategies in order to soften the force of his directives.

For example, the teacher uses the adverb "just" as part of the directives (lines 88, 92 and 100) "to indicate that . . . the intrinsic seriousness of the imposition . . . is not in itself great . . ." (Brown and Levinson 1987: 176). Another negative politeness strategy the teacher employs quite often is the use of the modal verb "can" (lines 45, 46, 60, 63, 72, 87, 91, 100, 110). In this way, the teacher implies that the students are not necessarily obliged to do the act requested of them, and this is another way of implying that the power difference between S and H is less marked. This use of "can" is perhaps simply an example of conventional indirectness -- the interesting thing about it, though, is that when the teacher uses it and his directive fails to convey the intended message, he switches to the more direct act of ordering (lines 45-49, 72-74). Obviously, the teacher feels the more direct he is, the more easily the students will understand the instructions.

A final strategy the teacher uses, this time a positive politeness one, is that of conveying that S and H are cooperators. An example of this is the teacher's use of the first-person personal *plu-*

ral pronoun "we," as in "We're going to take turns" (line 102) and "We're gonna work in groups" (line 90, see also line 40). "By using an inclusive 'we' form [instead of] 'you' . . . , [the teacher] can call upon the cooperative assumptions and thereby redress FTAs" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 127). Again this strategy seems to reduce the implied distance, and possibly power also, between S and H.

3) *Comprehension checks*

This component is difficult to isolate, as it occurs sporadically throughout the lesson as part of both "presentation" and "giving instructions." The main type of utterance that realizes this component, however, is easier to determine: i.e., questions. As Holmes (1984: 93) points out, under Searle's scheme, questions fall into the category of directives since they count as an attempt to get the hearer to do something — that is, provide an answer. In this respect, comprehension checks reflect the same aspects of face discussed above in the "presentation" section. In short, the student must maintain face by showing that he has understood the questions, and the teacher must do the same by showing that he is a good enough teacher that his comprehension checks *can* be understood. Thus we have a combination of face-threatening potential in this section of the lesson — the imposition implied by the directive nature of questioning (an infringement on the student's negative face), and the need for approval on the behalf of both teacher and student (positive face needs).

The data show evidence of at least two politeness strategies used by the teacher to redress the face-threatening potential of this situation. The first is the use of the word "everyone" as the subject in question formation (lines 1, 7, 90). This pronoun serves a similar function to the use of "we" in the last section. It creates a feeling of inclusiveness, and at the same time avoids the use of the more direct personal pronoun "you." And the second strategy consists of the use of the in-group term "guys" in line 93. This, of course, is part of the teacher's personal in-group vocabulary, and may not be understood by the students. Nevertheless, it counts as an attempt by the teacher to once again lessen the underlying distance be-

tween S and H; and, furthermore, the noun "guys" is modified by the determiner and pronoun combination "all you," which seems once again to imply a general sense of group membership.

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

From the teacher's use of politeness strategies in this brief sample analysis, we can see that he wishes to convey the feeling that there is a low power and distance relationship between himself and his students. I believe these strategies reflect the general politeness tendencies of the dominant social group the teacher represents, that is, white middle-class North American culture. In her analysis of classroom discourse, Poole (1992) contends that the overriding tendency in white middle-class interactions between experts and novices is for the expert (the teacher in our case) to assist and accommodate the novice as much as possible in order to reduce the intrinsic asymmetry of the power relations between interactants. Teacher-talk (the special register used by ESL teachers to accommodate their students), she suggests, is one of the prime examples of this dynamic. In fact, she quotes the use of first-person plural markers as an example from her data (p. 605), and this is what we saw from our own sample analysis above. She also notes teachers' hesitance in giving directives (p. 607), another phenomenon similar to what we saw in our analysis. All this, Poole concludes, points to a desire in white middle-class culture "to avoid the overt display of asymmetry" (p. 607) — which is directly opposed to other cultural systems of politeness, such as those of the Samoan (Poole 1992) and the Athabaskan Indian (Scollon and Scollon 1981).

Of considerable relevance here is the Thai context, which is also diametrically opposed to white middle-class norms of politeness. This is because in societies where maintaining social distance is a valued aspect of social interaction, the politeness system will be based on deference rather than solidarity (Scollon and Scollon 1981). This is especially true of Thai society, where "people tend to interrelate in terms of relative status, social distance, and extent of obligation"; where "hierarchy . . . and deferential manners are among the first things a child learns"; and where "peo-

ple are especially vulnerable to questions of 'face' [because] the distance between one's accepted presentation ('face') and one's emotional self is small" (Mulder 1994: 86-89). These assumptions raise many questions concerning cross-cultural interaction in the classroom and beyond, questions which, unfortunately, are outside the scope of the present study.

We can conclude from this brief synopsis that, in concurrence with Scollon and Scollon (1981: 190-191), "Teaching and learning in a particular group will involve both the manifestation and the inculcation of the group's given values." However, we must go beyond this and inquire whether the teacher's use of politeness strategies from his own culture is in any way beneficial to classroom practice and student learning. The first conclusion we might draw here is that if the teacher provides an authentic mode of discourse in the classroom -- that is, discourse the students

are likely to encounter outside the classroom -- then this will give them much needed input that will better equip them to deal with life in the mainstream culture. But as we saw from the data, the teacher's use of specific politeness strategies did not necessarily have a positive affect on the amount or speed of student language learning. Actually, this was a rather poor lesson in terms of student language acquisition. The question for further research, then, might be, How does the use of politeness strategies affect the quality of learning in the second language classroom? This might best be answered through extended classroom observation set up to determine whether there is a correlation between teachers' use of politeness strategies and student language acquisition -- a difficult task. At any rate, an appreciation of politeness strategies used in the classroom cannot but deepen our understanding of ourselves and our students, and this in itself should help lead to improved teaching.

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APPENDIX ONE — SEARLE'S SPEECH ACT SCHEMA

1) *Directives*

When a speaker produces an utterance to make the hearer carry out an action, a directive is being performed. Directives may range from direct commands in the imperative voice to indirect hints for a hearer to carry out some action. Here are a few examples:

Do the dishes!
Could you pick up some things at the store on your way over?
Where are the matches?

2) *Commissives*

Commissives are statements that function as promises or refusals for action. Again, they may vary in their degree of directness:

Maybe I can do that tomorrow.
I pledge allegiance to the Queen.

3) *Representatives*

A representative is an utterance intended as a statement of fact. These may also be downtoned in various ways:

What he said was completely misguided.
Maybe she just feels kinda blue.

4) *Declaratives*

Declaratives are speech acts that bring about a new state of being:

I now pronounce you man and wife.
Class dismissed.

5) *Expressives*

Expressives reveal emotional states, and attitudes such as sorrow, joy, anger, likes and dislikes:

I'm so very disappointed in you.
I love that show!

NOTE

This outline is adapted from Hatch (1992: 121-131) and is only a very brief synopsis. The functions themselves are by no means exhaustive; nor are they completely autonomous.

APPENDIX TWO — DATA BASE

- 1 T: the government wants to cut back on medical services. Does everyone know what *cut back on* means? ... No?
OK, when you cut back on something, you spend less money on it. OK. Why do you think the government wants to
cut back on medical services? OK, just a second [writes on board]. OK, when you cut back on something, it means
the dollars go down. It means you spend less money on it. So the government wants to spend less money on medi-
5 cal services. Some of these services, they want to cut them, because they don't ... the government doesn't have much
money, or maybe they want to drive more limousines or something. So they want to cut back on medical services.
OK, does everyone understand *cut back on* now? No? OK, say the government spends one billion dollars a year
on x-rays, so if they cut back on x-rays, they only spend half a million dollars. OK, before, they were spending one
billion dollars on x-rays, and if they cut back on x-rays, they're going to spend less money— maybe only one mil-
10 lion dollars. ...
Ss: [giggle]
T: OK, just think of it as spending less money. ... OK, say you spend \$100 a week for your grocery shopping, and
you think you're spending too much money, so you say to yourself "I'm going to cut back on grocery shopping,"
you only spend fifty dollars a week—you're cutting back on the grocery shopping. OK?
- 15 Ss: Yeah ...
T: Yeah? ... Do you understand, Zora? OK, how much money do you spend on groceries for one week? ... For
eating ... at home ... how much money?
Zora: hmmm ...
T: \$100? ...
- 25 Zora: ...
T: \$100, say?
Zora: Yes ... \$100.
T: Now, if you wanted to cut back on your grocery shopping, you would make sure that you only spent, say, fifty
dollars for a week. So that means *cut back on*. OK, OK..... OK, the government wants to cut back on some medical
30 services ... So ... and, ah ... maybe some people think the government should completely cover dental services,
and maybe, ah ... psychoanalysis, too. Maybe some people think the government should cover that. OK ... Some
people think they shouldn't make any cutbacks. OK, now when you cut back on something, you make a cutback
[writes on board]. So you cut back on ... When you cut back on something, you make a cutback—a cutback. OK?
Can everybody say that? ... *cutback!*
- 35 S: Cutback
T: So ... now ...
S: Cutback
T: hmm ... cutback, yeah. Now ... I've cunningly put these questions here [pulling up OHP screen]
Ss: Ahhha [laughing]
- 40 T: Now, we're gonna do an exercise and we're gonna ask each other if the government should cut back on medical
services ... Now, ah ... What's your name?
Samim: Samim.
T: Samim?
Samim: Samim.
- 45 T: Samim, if I ask you, "Should the government cut back on, um, x-rays?" what do you think? And you can use
this sentence ... you can use this sentence to answer me.
Samim: We should ...
T: No, use this sentence [pointing] and say "The government should, or shouldn't, cut back on x-rays because ...
and you have to give me a reason.
- 50 Samim: Hmm, yes ... The government should cut back ... ah ... x-rays?
T: Yeah, x-rays.
Samim: ... x-rays. The government should take more money ...
T: OK.
Samim: ... and, ah, *make* money [laughs]
- 55 T: OK, so Samim is saying the government should, ah, cut back on, ah, x-rays because they need to make more
money, OK. That's a good reason.
Samim: To save on money?
T: Because ...
Samim: To make money?
- 60 T: Ah, yeah, you can say "to save on money." Yeah, that's good. OK, I'm gonna ask someone else now ... Um,
Janet, if I asked you, "Do you think cosmetic surgery is important?"

- Janet:** No.
T: Um, you can answer me with the second sentence there.
Janet:
- 65 **T:** Oh, OK, sorry. I should put . . . You can say "is not." Say the sentence.
Janet: Cos
T: Cosmetic surgery.
Janet: I believe cosmetic surgery is not important.
T: Why?
- 70 **Janet:** Because not for everybody.
T: OK, because it's not for everybody. OK, very good. Now if I ask one other person. Um . . . Hassam, do you think we should have to pay for psychoanalysis? And you can answer me using this sentence, here.
Hassam: [mumbles]
T: Um, use this sentence.
- 75 **Hassam:** We shouldn't have to pay for psych . . . psycho . . .
T: Psychoanalysis
Hassam: Psychoanalysis.
T: Yep Because?
Hassam: [rubs fingers together to indicate money]
- 80 **T:** OK. What . . . why do you think . . . ?
Hassam: Make money.
T: Um, because it's too expensive? Psychoanalysis is too expensive?
Hassam: [nods] Too expensive.
T: OK. OK, so what Hassam is saying is that we shouldn't have to pay for psychoanalysis because it's too expensive. Everyone knows what expensive means?
- 85 **Ss:** Yeah
T: Costs a lot of money. . . . OK, I'm just going to give you an exercise, and you can work in groups . . . and you're just gonna discuss one of these issues—one of these, ah, words here, one of these medical services, and you have to take turns in your group and use one of these sentences, to say if you think they should pay for it or not. OK, so
- 90 does everyone understand what we're gonna do? We're gonna work in groups and everyone's gonna take a turn to use one of these sentences and you can choose any one of these that you want, OK. . . . You can practice these sentences while you're doing it. So you have to take turns in your group. [passing out handout] Just rip it. So I'm gonna come round and help out a little bit, OK. [To one group] OK, so do all you guys understand what you have to do?
- 95 **S:** What's psychoanalysis?
T: OK, psychoanalysis is when you go to see a psychologist and you talk with him, but it costs a lot of money. They make you pay a lot of money for each session. . . . OK, so you have to take turns . . . you have to take turns using one of these sentences. So, who's gonna go first? Carlos?
- Carlos:** Good morning.
- 100 **T:** Hi. . . . OK, so you have to use one of these sentences and use psychoanalysis and then give a reason. OK, and if one person can just write down what the people think, and one person's gonna tell me what the group thinks about this. OK. But you must take turns to use this, to say this, OK. [circulates]
T: OK, now, everybody, we're going to take turns in the groups and we're going to . . . your group . . . one person from the group is going to tell the class what you thought about your topic. OK . . . What's your name? Do you
- 105 want to talk for your group?
S: Ming
T: Ming? What was your topic? What was here for you? What was your service?
Ss in group: Psycho
T: Psychoanalysis.
- 110 **Ming:** I think the government should cut back on . . .
T: Use . . . you could use . . . use the last sentence: "We shouldn't have to pay for . . ." OK, you can use this sentence Ming. Use this sentence.
Another S: I shouldn't have to pay for
T: OK, what's your topic? Psychoanalysis.
- 115 **S:** We shouldn't have to pay for
T: Psychoanalysis.
S: [nods]
T: OK, Why? Because . . . ?
S: Very expensive.
T: OK, good. Because it's very expensive. [End of sample]