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LINGUISTIC POLITENESS: THE STATE OF THE ART [1]

MARY SIFIANOU

The aim of this paper is to examine Brown and Levinson's theory of interpersonal interaction in the light of both confirmatory and contradictory research which followed its original publication. Thus, the paper outlines the theory briefly, focusing on those aspects which have invoked greater controversy, such as its alleged universal applicability. It is maintained that to date research is inadequate to support such claims and that other aspects of politeness and related culturally-specific concepts, such as generosity, tact, even impoliteness, should also be investigated. Finally, areas of the theory which require reconsideration are suggested.

1. Introduction

Despite their great significance in social life, politeness phenomena did not receive by scholars the explicit attention they deserved until the late 1970s with the exception of that given by Lakoff (1973, 1975). In 1978, the publication of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was a major breakthrough. Their work triggered off a wealth of research on the issue undertaken in a variety of fields, such as linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, pragmatics and anthropology. This extensive interest presumably led to the reissue of the publication in 1987, which, interestingly enough, coincided with the establishment of October 2nd as the «National Courtesy Day» in England.

The original theory has been partly supported and partly contested by subsequent studies, a great number of which are presented and assessed in the extended introduction of the new edition. Given the widespread and continuing interest, and the extent of the ensuing literature on the subject, it would be impossible to consider it all in a single article. Consequently, this paper is an attempt to present briefly the major issues with a view to reappraising the phenomena and suggesting directions for future research. We shall first outline the model briefly and then focus on specific aspects which appear to be controversial.

However, it should be stressed from the outset that no discussion concerning politeness phenomena can detract in the slightest from the significance and impressiveness of Brown and Levinson's contribution to the study of a highly complex subject of investi-

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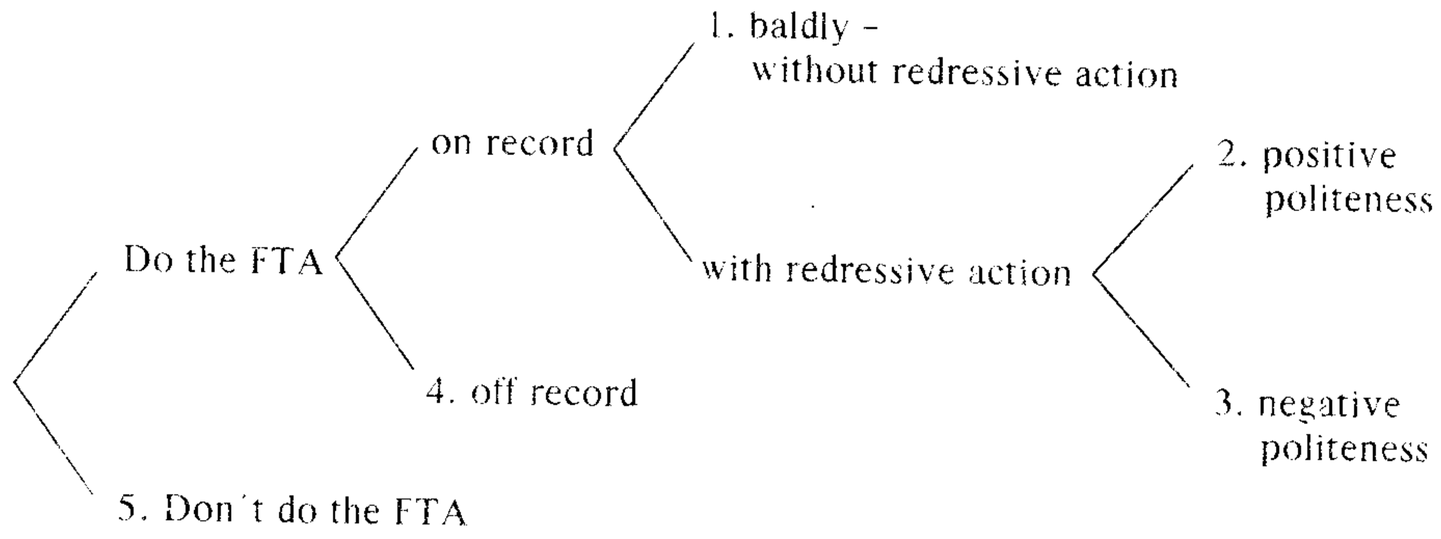
[1] I would like to express my gratitude to Eleni Antonopoulou and Robert F. Halls who made the time to read and comment on this paper.

gation. Their achievement is reflected in that «the theory of politeness is becoming a virtual movement» (Coupland, Grainger and Coupland 1988, 253).

Brown and Levinson developed a theory of politeness, where linguistic devices are realisations of politeness strategies. The striking parallels between the three unrelated languages they investigated convinced them that there are underlying universal principles of politeness. They postulate a Model Person (MP), who is a «wilful fluent speaker of a natural language», endowed with two properties: rationality and face. Fundamental to their theory is the notion of face, which they define as «the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting of two related aspects» (1987, 61). These are roughly, «the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects» (ibid., 58), which they call «negative» and «positive» face, respectively. Face is vulnerable and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. Being rational, all MPs will select appropriate linguistic means to safeguard each other's face.

For Brown and Levinson, almost all verbal actions pose a threat to either the positive or the negative aspect of face of the addressee and or the speaker; they are, thus, face-threatening acts (FTAs). For instance, orders, threats and requests threaten the addressee's negative face since they impose on his her freedom of action; whereas complaints and criticism threaten his her positive face since they indicate disapproval. Accepting thanks and offers threatens the speaker's negative face, whereas apologising and accepting compliments threaten his her positive face. Interactants will seek to avoid committing such threatening acts by employing the appropriate alternative to ensure that the communication of the message is clear and that they are polite. Appropriateness is determined by the summative effect of three social variables -- the vertical social distance between interactants, the horizontal social distance between interactants, and the weight of imposition entailed by the particular act.

The following diagram illustrates the five major alternatives proposed for dealing with face-threatening acts. Each strategy is numbered to indicate that the higher the number, the more polite the utterance realising it.



Possible strategies for doing FTAs (from Brown and Levinson 1987, 69)

Thus, for various reasons the speaker may decide to perform *on record, baldly, without redressive action* (1). Such an utterance will be clear and concise, adhering to all of Grice's (1975) conversational maxims. An instance of this is «Open the window». S/he may, however, decide to go *on record but with redressive action*. Redressive action

means action taken to counteract the potential face-threat, achieved through additional elements or structural variation. Such action can take two forms, according to which aspect of face is prevalent: (a) the speaker may decide to consider the addressee's positive face by indicating general approval and solidarity, in other words, resorting to *positive politeness strategies* (2), or (b) s/he may decide to consider his/her addressee's negative face by indicating reluctance to impinge on him/her; in other words, resorting to *negative politeness strategies* (3). For example, «Open the window, mate» versus «I wonder if you could open the window».

Finally, the speaker may decide to go *off record*, i.e., to verbalise his/her act in a way that interpretation is left to the addressee (4). For example, «Are you going to the university tomorrow?», which can be interpreted either as a simple question for information or as a request for a lift. The content of such utterances will be obscure and ambiguous, violating all Grice's maxims. In this way, the speaker can easily avoid responsibility for the imposing act, if challenged. Actually, what Brown and Levinson claim is that politeness (consideration of face) is a strong motivation for not adhering to Grice's conversational maxims. The fifth strategy is rather paradoxical in that the speaker simply decides not to perform the act at all (5) since the estimated risk of loss of face is very high. These broad strategies are supplemented by a wide variety of more specific devices. Brown and Levinson's commitment to this hierarchical order of the strategies stems from the assumption that the more imposing the act, the more freedom of action the addressee should be given. Their pleasant surprise to find extensive parallels in the unrelated languages they studied justified their conviction about underlying universal principles of the phenomena. However, as Hymes (1986, 80) aptly points out, «the occurrence of parallel forms of utterance is not enough to provide the basis for a universal theory. One has to know the social structure in which the forms of utterance occur and the cultural values which inform that structure». Moreover, growing research which has stemmed from their theory but which has expanded to cover a variety of other aspects and cultures provides evidence that diversities may not be as superficial as they were at first assumed to be.

2. Universality of politeness

The question of whether politeness is a universal value or not features prominently in most sociolinguistic discussions, in particular in research concerning politeness phenomena. Although scholars are unanimous in accepting the universality of the concept, dissent arises when the particulars are explored. A common denominator for the major politeness models, notably those by Lakoff (1973, 1975), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983), is that their rules, strategies and maxims of politeness are universal, with some leeway for cross-cultural variation. Such contentions have, however, been challenged and the theories have been charged with inadequacy and ethnocentricity. For instance, Hymes (1986) raised serious objections concerning the universal applicability of such models. For him, neither the maxims nor the rules or strategies of politeness are justified as candidates for universality, since evidence is largely based on individual utterances. Consideration of cultural orientation and norms of interaction may change the perspective of linguistic forms.

The basic source of this dissent seems to be the still limited research into a great

variety of entirely diverse language communities. Only findings from such a carefully compared and contrasted, large scale project can guarantee validity of claims concerning the universality or otherwise of the phenomena. However, in the light of fascinating evidence from research which has accrued to date, one is tempted to side with those who are sceptical about the universality of the models proposed. This may be just a reflection of the fact that current research, despite its extent, is still fragmentary, and this contributes to the downplaying of commonalities, and the emphasising of differences. In any event, there is no doubt that more research is needed as it is also clear that current theories need revision and elaboration (cf. Kasper 1990).

This dearth of research is also probably responsible for the relative lack of definitions of the concept of politeness and the bias exhibited in those definitions which are presented. In this respect, linguists share the problem with laymen, who can describe polite, and normally impolite verbal and non-verbal behaviour, but find it extremely difficult to define the concept itself.

2.1 Definitions of politeness

Despite the different approaches to politeness espoused by the prominent theorists mentioned earlier, their common denominator is the visualisation of politeness as a means of avoiding conflict. This is made explicit by Lakoff (1975. 64), who says that «politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction» and by Leech (1983,19), who defines «tact» as «strategic conflict avoidance». This view, basic though implicit, permeates Brown and Levinson's entire theory, since they view politeness as redressive action addressed to threats affecting the interactant's face unfavourably.

Such conceptualisation probably reflects a cultural bias of societies where the individual's territory is so sacred that any encroachment constitutes a serious reason for conflict. This orientation is not surprising since theorising originated in Northen- European type of societies, where the individual's rights to non- imposition are at a premium.

Remarkably, what has been ignored in such definitions is that not all societies place the same emphasis on the individual's rights, and that politeness, besides being a means of restraining feelings, is also a means of expressing them. Compliments, for instance, are polite means of expressing positive feelings and emotions, at least in some cultures. However, Brown and Levinson (1987, 66) discern primarily face- threatening aspects even in such acts. True though this may be for some contexts and cultures, a model with claims to universality should cater for all possibilities. People are not always on the verge of war which they try to avoid by being polite, and communication is not a kind of «fundamentally dangerous and antagonistic endeavour» (Kasper 1990, 194), as the predictions of these theories would have us believe.

Other definitions, notably that proposed by Hill, et al. (1986, 349), are more positive since they acknowledge that although politeness constrains interaction, it also promotes rapport. Ide (1989, 225) defines politeness as «language usage associated with smooth interaction». This rather simple definition seems to cover the range of the term, which could be broadly defined as «appropriate social behaviour according to expected norms». However, it is my contention that at the present stage of research one could reasonably assume that politeness as a concept representing an abstract, social value is

most probably universal, even though the way in which this concept is visualised (and thus defined), and how it is realised verbally and non-verbally will most probably be culture-specific. Furthermore, as Ide (1989) argues, there are aspects pertinent to politeness in Japanese which are neglected by the theory. She considers «volition» and «discernment», integral aspects to the universals of politeness, and proposes a comprehensive framework for their incorporation. Discernment, which is basic to Japanese politeness, refers to the almost automatic observance of rules based on social convention. An instance of this could be the choice between singular and plural to single addressees in Greek[2]. Volition, which is more basic to European politeness, refers to choices based on considerations of face. Her convincing arguments seem to require a reconsideration of Brown and Levinson's model.

Consequently, it may be safer for the time being to concentrate on extensive and exhaustive intra-cultural research and bi-cultural comparisons and only when there are adequate findings from a wide range of entirely diverse societies, to investigate the possibility of convergent points and formulate a definition and strategies which stand a chance of being recognised as universally valid.

2.2 The notion of face

As mentioned earlier, central to Brown and Levinson's theory is the notion of face. Brown and Levinson argue that the notion of face is universal, although they acknowledge the possibility of cross-cultural variability concerning the types of acts which threaten face and the importance attached to cultural notions of, for instance, honour and virtue.

Directly related to this is the variability allowed by the theory, concerning the orientation of certain societies towards more positive or more negative politeness preferences. Oriental cultures have been attributed a more negative politeness orientation (Brown and Levinson 1987, 245). What is striking is that researchers investigating politeness phenomena in these cultures are among those who have challenged the alleged universality of face. Hill, et al. (1986) and Matsumoto (1988) in their studies concerning Japanese, and Gu (1990) in the study of Modern Chinese argue that the conceptualisation of face in these societies is incompatible with the notion of negative face. They attribute this concept of negative face to the dominant role of individualism in Western cultures and contrast this with the significance placed on social relationships in Oriental cultures. They conclude that the differences observed cannot be accommodated within the existing theory and, consequently, question the universality of the notion of face being comprised of a positive and a negative component. On similar lines, Ide (1989, 241) argues that it is not the content but the weight of face which differs in different cultures, adding that in Japanese honorifics are used even in non-face- threatening activities.

On the other hand, studies considering politeness phenomena in Western, Eastern and Mediterranean cultures seem to have endorsed, though indirectly in certain cases, some of the basic claims of the theory. The interesting common denominator in these

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2. For an extensive study of the various uses of the plural in Greek, see A. Bakakou- Orphanou.

studies is that societies such as the Israeli (Blum-Kulka 1987), the Polish (Wierzbicka 1985) and the Greek (Sifianou 1987) have been identified as bearing a positive politeness orientation. Although these findings may reflect a certain similarity of cultural values pertaining to these societies, there is also evidence from other cultures such as Ojibwa (Rhodes 1989), which exhibit a positive politeness orientation, based on the presumed cooperation between language users. Thus, relevant research so far concerning cultural orientation directs attention to the inadequacy of predictions relating to negative politeness in particular. To my knowledge, no society other than the English has been happily identified so far as exhibiting a negative politeness orientation.

As far as Greek society is concerned, evidence to date does indicate that it is a more positive politeness oriented society (Marmaridou 1987, Sifianou 1987 and 1989). This is not unrelated to the fact that, for historical and geographical reasons, relatively small and tightly-knit groups, rather than individuals, constitute the basic structure of the society. Thus, appropriate behaviour among members of such groups, including close friends and relatives, entails every kind of support for one another. The individual's actions are a mirror of the group as a whole and his/her endeavours are directed at enhancing the group image through his/her own image. For instance, members of an achiever's in-group share part of the success, since achievement is viewed as depending on the group's support.

In this framework, the notion of face has little if anything to do with being unimpeded by others (negative aspect) as an individual. Furthermore, the desire for approval (positive aspect) is not limited to approval for the self but extends to cover the face of the whole group. It is extremely difficult for a member of a disliked, shame-faced group to achieve any personal goals and satisfy any of his/her face-wants. This positive politeness orientation means neither that negative politeness strategies are absent nor that all positive ones postulated by the theory are observed. One might well express reservations relating to some of these strategies, but that goes beyond the scope of this work. Suffice it to note that the «Seek agreement» and «Avoid disagreement» which are presented as positive politeness strategies appear incongruous within such a framework. One can speculate that safe topics, such as comments on the weather, which are seen as realisations of these strategies, rather characterise a society like that of the British, in which one should try to avoid being seen as imposing his/her views on the addressee. By contrast, in Greece, interactants tend to raise «unsafe» topics, such as their views on politics. Though common ground and agreement may be revealed, this does not have the highest priority under such circumstances. Presenting different views is challenging and contributes to long and lively interactions. This attitude can be seen as a way of showing interest in the interlocutor, who has worthy, though different views.

2.3 Hierarchy of politeness strategies

As mentioned earlier, one of Brown and Levinson's basic assumptions is that their politeness super-strategies are intrinsically ranked, with off-record strategies being the most polite, followed by negative strategies and then by positive ones. This ranking has been challenged by a number of scholars on various grounds.

The very first problem relates to the nature of positive and negative strategies. Brown and Levinson (1987, 70) acknowledge differences between them when they say that

positive politeness is approach-based and not directed at a particular act, whereas negative politeness is avoidance-based and addressed towards a particular act. The possibility of a mixture of positive- and negative-politeness elements in an utterance is viewed as a kind of hybrid strategy (ibid., 230).

Scollon and Scollon (1981) distinguish more basic differences between these strategies and argue that since they are different phenomena they cannot be ranked on a unidimensional scale. Brown and Levinson, however, insist, though with some scepticism in their second edition, that these strategies are so ordered and that they are mutually exclusive. This ranking follows, according to them (ibid., 18), «from the Durkheimian perspective: rituals of approach are for lesser deities, those of avoidance for the ultimate deity».

Two related questions naturally arise here: a) Does this hierarchy conceal any implicit assumption of degrees of politeness exhibited by different societies, since their theory allows for politeness orientations? Are, for instance, the British more polite than the Americans, since the former exemplify a negative politeness and the latter a positive politeness orientation (Brown and Levinson 1987, 245)? b) How does this orientation of societies fit with the claim that the extent of threat entailed by the act determines the choice of the strategy to minimise it? If we allow for cross-cultural variability on the weight of threats, how can we expect them to be appropriately softened through the same means? Considerations such as these make one wonder whether this hierarchy is indeed problematic. The only plausible explanation that one could offer at this stage is that this ranking reflects the culturally-specific significance attached to social distance and non-imposition, which obviously cannot hold cross-culturally.

Brown and Levinson are not alone in viewing negative politeness as inherently more polite than positive politeness. Leech (1983, 133) claims that there is a more general law which professes that «negative politeness (avoidance of discord) is a more weighty consideration than positive politeness (seeking concord)». Although these terms as used by Leech differ from the way they are used by Brown and Levinson[3], the underlying implication of distance and formality being characteristic of negative politeness is still a powerful determining factor of politeness. Contrary to such claims, Baxter (1984, 451) presents evidence in support of a reverse ordering in the hierarchy of politeness; in some respects positive politeness strategies were assessed by his informants as more polite than negative politeness strategies.

Related is the concern shared by various scholars (Harris 1984; Brown and Gilman 1989), namely that positive and negative politeness strategies are not as distinct as presented by the theory. For one thing, they can be mixed in discourse, i.e. positive politeness markers can be employed within negative politeness strategies. The growing evidence seems to confirm the need to re-examine the issue. It may be true, as Brown and Levinson (1987, 17) suggest, that in short stretches more than one face-threatening act is performed, and that these encode different degrees of imposition and thus motivate different politeness strategies. If, however, this is evidenced in short stretches, what would prevent its appearance in longer exchanges?

Assuming that in a specific context the values of horizontal and vertical social

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3. For Leech (1983, 83) negative politeness consists in minimising the impoliteness of impolite illocutions and positive politeness consists in maximising the politeness of polite illocutions

distance remain stable, the acts performed in long exchanges may or may not have the same value as regards the degree of imposition encoded. Thus, a shift of devices is only to be expected. Given also the fact that in long interactions the vertical social distance which may exist between interactants, may not remain constant throughout the exchange, the shifting of strategies is made possible and understandable. If true, this weakens the claims of independence and mutual exclusiveness of positive and negative politeness and the relationship of increased weight of imposition with increased formality remains to be verified both empirically and cross-culturally. The crucial point is that since interaction is a dynamic process (participants can evaluate the features of context at any particular moment and can contrive ways of succeeding), a certain mixture of strategies is understandable. The difficulty of perceiving mixtures of strategies may stem from the fact that Brown and Levinson's theory is largely based on short decontextualised utterances, where mixtures are more difficult to find.

A second problem relates to the award of higher levels of politeness to off-record than on-record negative politeness strategies. Blum-Kulka (1987) challenged this assumption suggesting that, at least for requests, politeness is associated with conventional indirectness (on-record, negative politeness), but not necessarily with non-conventional (off-record) indirectness, leaving room for cross- cultural variation. Her basic argument is that a certain interactional balance between clarity and non-coerciveness is necessary for any utterance to count as polite. This balance is achieved in the case of conventional (structural)[4] indirectness constructions which are rated in her experiments as the most polite. In the case of direct constructions, clarity overrides non- coerciveness and in the case of non-conventional (pragmatic) indirectness, non-coerciveness overrides clarity; thus, they can both be perceived as not polite since the necessary balance is destroyed.

Brown and Levinson (1987, 19) admit that there might be an «efficiency» factor involved in assessing politeness, since it is not polite to impose inferential demands on superiors, but argue that Blum-Kulka's experimental design and results do not offer genuine counter-cases to their contention that off-record strategies are generally more polite than negative politeness strategies. It seems to me, however, that more cross-cultural investigation should be conducted before any definitive conclusions can be safely drawn regarding degrees of politeness in indirect constructions in general. Blum-Kulka examined perceptions of directness and politeness in Hebrew and English. However, what she calls «English informants» are all native speakers of American English. This choice of informants seems to have an important consequence, because although it is true that the Americans and the English largely share the same linguistic code, there is no doubt that they do not share exactly the same values and attitudes (note also Brown and Levinson's observation of the different politeness orientations of the two societies). It is, therefore, not unreasonable to assume that there may have been very different findings had the informants been native speakers of British English, bearing in mind Gumperz's (1982, 135) assumption that the English are a lot more indirect than the Americans. The above observations should not be interpreted as justification of Brown

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4. I prefer to call «conventional» indirectness «syntactic» indirectness because it is based on structural elaboration mainly in the form of hedged performatives, and to call «non- conventional» indirectness «pragmatic» indirectness because it is characterised by structurally simple constructions and can also be conventional.

and Levinson's ranking of politeness strategies, as they only point to the need for further cross-cultural research on the subject. It seems that a lot depends on what has been conventionalised to function as more polite or more formal in the specific context. Conventionalisation diminishes the length of the inferential process necessary for the interpretation of both structurally and pragmatically indirect constructions. It could be argued that the degree of conventionalisation contributes decisively to the balance between clarity and non-coerciveness and thus to the degree of politeness.

Furthermore, pragmatic indirectness is also frequently found, at least in Greek, in familiar and familial contexts, where it is extremely difficult to see any need for employing the highest levels of politeness. For instance, it is extremely doubtful that the father who says «Where is the newspaper?» implying «Bring me the newspaper» has any intention of being extremely polite.

In conlusion, it should be noted that it is not at all clear that «polite friendliness» will be less polite than «polite formality» or «polite off-recordness» in appropriate context. Overt markers of politeness associated mainly with polite formality will tend to be rated as more polite exactly because they are marked for politeness, or rather for formality. They are drilled into everybody as typical politeness markers and they will inevitably be the first ones to come to mind.

Brown and Levinson (1987, 20), however, argue that the various deviations from their hierarchy which emerged from research, are not convincing, because these deviations do not provide any clear evidence of an alternative form of ranking. It is really surprising that Brown and Levinson are asking for a universally valid alternative ranking, since the hierarchy they propose is based on a cost benefit analysis, i.e., on the imposition involved, a notion which clearly has culturally-specific definitions.

2.4 Variables determining politeness

The three social variables (the relative power, the social distance and the weight of imposition) presented by the theory as crucial for determining the levels of politeness have attracted considerable attention from scholars. Although these seem to be basic factors, they may be too simple and misleading to account for the complexity of human relations and social behaviour, as Rosaldo (1982, 208) argues convincingly and as Brown and Levinson (1987, 16) concede. The two variables concerning the relationship between speaker and addressee are the same as those proposed by Brown and Gilman (1960) to account for the semantics of pronouns of address.

Holtgraves (1986) introduces reciprocal liking between interactants as yet another variable affecting the choice of phrasing of a particular utterance. Similarly, Brown and Gilman (1989, 192) demonstrate that in the four Shakespeare tragedies they examine, politeness and liking rather than familiarity are proportionate, i.e. more liking results in greater politeness and vice versa. Baxter (1984) also posits a liking factor as influencing choice of linguistic strategy and claims that the power factor was not found to be as influential as one would have expected. He, too, concludes that greater politeness is used in closer relationships.

It becomes apparent from such studies that social distance must be distinguished from affect; in other words, social factors from psychological ones (cf. Kasper 1990). Ide (1989, 240) suggests that psychological factors such as affect or intimacy are more

relevant to positive politeness, whereas social variables like power and distance are more relevant within the «discernment» aspect of politeness. It is intuitively clear that affect/liking is a determining factor with regard to the choice of behaviour in general because familiars or close relatives do not necessarily like one another and, consequently, are not necessarily concerned with satisfying one another's face wants. What seems to deserve further investigation is exactly what is meant by more liking entailing greater politeness; that is, what type of politeness is involved. I would find it extremely difficult to believe that more liking between familiars would entail higher degrees of classical politeness markers such as *please* and *thank you* or pragmatically indirect constructions. What can be expected in such cases is acts indicating mutual concern and support and fewer formal expressions.

3. Concluding remarks

The foregoing has been an attempt to present briefly the state of the art in linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson's theory, being the cornerstone in its breadth and elaboration, has been the one most extensively challenged and supported. Despite the wealth of research that their endeavour has generated, an adequate definition of the concept still seems to be much needed. The conceptualisation of politeness as «strategic conflict avoidance» leaves one puzzled about the nature of interaction in general. Such visualisations miss what is intuitively clear, namely, that politeness is the norm. Competent native speakers usually comment on the absence of politeness rather than its presence, exactly because the norm usually goes unnoticed, whereas what is perceived to fall beyond the bounds of particular norms attracts attention and comments.

It seems that a lot of discussion concerning politeness really applies to formality and deference, but clearly deference and politeness are not synonymous. The same is true of other concepts such as tact and generosity, which though related are not synonymous with politeness. The extent of their relationship deserves careful consideration. Furthermore, there may be culturally-specific concepts and manifestations, viewed as appropriate behaviours, which deserve serious attention in that they may open up other avenues of investigation of politeness phenomena which have been ignored so far. The fact that people can more easily identify impolite rather than polite behaviour may point to the importance of considering this aspect of behaviour more systematically.

Apart form social conventions and cultural systems and values, which are important to recognise, we need to consider the psychological factors and even personal traits which influence behaviour. Affect was found to be such a factor and it seems intuitively clear that traits such as shyness and effusiveness will also play a significant role.

Consequently, claims to universality regarding both the concept and the strategies emanating from it will have to await a fuller understanding of the forms and meanings of politeness in a wide variety of entirely diverse societies and contexts. It is not enough to know merely that there are some universal principles of interaction. Understanding of and sensitisation towards the minutiae of cultural particulars is also a prerequisite for successful social relations and interactions.

The significance of extensive research cannot be underestimated since what is involved in being polite or impolite extends beyond the bounds of academic interests and touches every individual on both individual and international levels. Its importance

becomes even more salient in Europe in view of its unification. As language barriers fall and contact among people from various backgrounds increases, the importance of the in-depth study of issues pertinent to such contacts becomes apparent. Polite behaviour is one such essential issue. A better understanding of what is involved in being polite will contribute to the necessary sensitisation of the similarities and differences between peoples and will, consequently, reduce the anxiety and bitter feelings of people who may be perceived as rude, domineering or standoffish when their intentions deep down are the opposite.

M. Sifianou
University of Athens

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