The Evolution of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory in an Age of Online Communication

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Abstract

Through their politeness theory, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) posit an original model of interpersonal interaction and message-design based on the mutual wants of the interactants. Their ideas spawned an entirely new field of research into human communication and garnered a fair share of praise and criticism.

In this modified review of literature, I will define and examine the key concepts of Brown and Levinson's seminal theory and explore how it has subsequently been employed by a variety of scholars. I will then explore its place in an age where individuals are communicating online like never before and suggest further research.

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No interpersonal interaction could sustain itself without civility among the interactants. The absence of cooperation in conversation would erode dialogue into one-sided rants ending in the achievement of nothing. To prevent this result, communicators acknowledge and appease the wants of their conversational counterparts in a number of ways.

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson sought to explain how these mutual wants are negotiated in their original "politeness theory." Formulated in 1978 and expanded in their 1987 book "Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage," politeness theory boils the logistics of human interaction down to two universal desires: that to be appreciated and that to be free from intrusion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125).

Research stemming from Brown and Levinson's theory has shed significant light on both its values and shortcomings. Now, 23 years after the theorists' revised politeness model was committed to paper, we live in a time uniquely suited for a reexamination of their ideas. Through the widespread use of the Internet as a communications tool – via e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms and listserves – interpersonal interaction seems to have lost much of its "personalness," and investing the energy to "do politeness" (Stewart, 2008, 44) may have taken a back seat to the desire to instantly achieve one's wants no matter the consequences.

As society increasingly embraces technology to interact, and this technology increasingly allows for anonymity between interactants, will we continue to respect each of our "universal desires" to be appreciated and free from intrusion?

This paper will examine the origins of politeness theory and its key concepts as well as explore how the model has evolved and been adapted in subsequent research. Many scholars have dissected politeness in human interaction at the physical level, yet one area not sufficiently examined is how politeness factors into 21st-century computer-mediated communication (CMC). To that end, I will conclude with an original, perhaps surprising, take on politeness theory's application in CMC and how this idea could be investigated.

Brown and Levinson's "Politeness Theory": A Summary

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can be traced to the dramaturgical theories on "face" put forth by Erving Goffman (Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006; Darics, 2010; Locher, 2006; O'Driscoll, 2007; Stewart, 2008) and the work of Paul Grice (1975), particularly his cooperative principle (Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006;

Locher & Watts, 2005; Xie, He & Lin, 2005), which "requires that utterances by participants should be directed towards the very goal, and it is this kind of cooperation that helps the whole interaction to move in a smooth and constructive direction" (Xin, He and Lin, 2005, 436).

Face

Goffman (1967) describes face as a person's "most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure" (p. 10). Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (p. 61).

Since each individual's face is "on loan…from society" (Goffman, 1967, p. 10), every interaction requires a person to work to maintain the integrity of his/her face, an endeavor Goffman calls "face-work." While Goffman was primarily interested in constructing a theory of social interaction, not politeness (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006, p. 14), Brown and Levinson sought to reduce Goffman's theory to focus on ways "politeness" is used as "face-work." As such, their model of politeness is an effort to account for how each individual negotiates his/her "face needs" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125) while accounting for the needs, or wants, of others.

Face Needs

Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris (2006) define politeness as "a set of norms or values that crucially influences the volitional and strategic action of individuals...[and] reflects in verbal and nonverbal behaviour something of the deep-seated values of individual cultures" (p. 12). Brown and Levinson believed that while all cultures have different levels of required politeness and various ways of being polite, all people have the desire to be appreciated and protected (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125). The theorists separated these face needs into two categories: "positive face" and "negative face" (Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 216).

Positive face

One's "positive face" is his/her desire to be appreciated and approved, to be liked and honored (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125). The concept is multidimensional, as it pertains to a range of characteristics, actions and possessions of which the individual desires others to appreciate (Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 220).

Negative face

One's "negative face" is his/her desire to be free from imposition or intrusion (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125). Unlike positive face, negative face is a unidimensional concept, as Brown and Levinson (1978) state it pertains to "very restricted aspects of [a hearer's] self-image, centering on his want to be unimpeded" (as cited by Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 220).

Face Threatening Acts (FTAs)

Often times, infringing on one's positive or negative face needs cannot be helped. Brown and Levinson term such behavior as engaging in a "face-threatening act" (FTA) (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125). Some speech acts, like requests, refusals (Johnson, 2008, p. 149) or directives (Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 217) seem to be inherently face-threatening, however determining when a message becomes a face-threat, what constitutes a face-threat, or the distribution of responsibility between interactants to identify a face-threat has spurred much follow-up investigation (Johnson, Roloff & Riffee, 2004; O'Driscoll, 2007; Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992).

Positive and Negative Politeness

To mitigate threats to one's positive or negative face, Brown and Levinson distinguished two politeness methods: "positive politeness" and "negative politeness."

Positive politeness

When a threat to one's desire to be approved or liked (positive face) is unavoidable, utilizing "positive politeness" to soften the speech act helps alleviate some corresponding face-threat. For example, if a student wished to ask a professor to reconsider his/her grade, baldy saying "I would like you to reconsider my grade" carries a higher level of face-threat than if the same desire was conveyed with a dose of positive politeness: "*I would appreciate it* [emphasis added] if you could look at my grade again" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 126).

Negative politeness

"Negative politeness" helps mitigate threats to one's desire to be unimpeded or un-intruded upon (negative face). Prefacing a request for a favor with "I'm sorry to bother you…" is an example of utilizing negative politeness (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125).

Delivering the FTA

With the concepts of positive and negative politeness in mind, Brown and Levinson outlined five possible forms of delivering a face-threatening act: directly without polite action; in

conjunction with positive politeness; in conjunction with negative politeness; indirectly or off the record; or not at all (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 125).

Within the two instances where a form of politeness is used, certain speech devices are often employed. These include the use of the conditional, the use of the ambivalent *on*, hedging, giving justifications for the unhappy situation, and the final agent decision strategy (Stewart, 2008, p. 48).

How an individual identifies which of the five methods to use when delivering an FTA depends on Brown and Levinson's original formula: $Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$, where "the amount of work *(W)* one puts into being polite depends on the social distance *(D)* between the speaker *(S)* and the hearer *(H)*, plus the power *(P)* of the hearer over the speaker, plus the risk *(R)* of hurting the other person" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 126; Yabucchi, 2006, p. 327).

Brown and Levinson's "Politeness Theory": Advanced Research and Impressions

According to Watts, the literature that has emerged since the introduction of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory can be grouped into five categories: criticisms; empirical work on particular types of speech activity; cross-cultural comparison and contrast; the application of politeness models; and intermittent attempts to suggest other lines of inquiry (as cited by Xie, He & Lin, 2005, p. 433). With politeness theory's influence on a range of research (Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2010; Johnson, Roloff & Riffee, 2004; O'Driscoll, 2007; Xie, He & Lin, 2005), it is no wonder the model has been called a "great achievement" (O'Driscoll, 2007, p. 465), a "theoretical basis" for communication studies (Johnson, Roloff & Riffee, 2004, p. 347) "the most comprehensive treatment of face and language to date" (Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992, p. 215) and "a guiding beacon for scholars" (Locher & Watts, 2005, p. 9).

Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) point out that Brown and Levinson's ideas have been used to examine service encounters (Lambert, 1996; Kong, 1998b; Pan, 200b), institutional settings (Roberts, 1992; Jameson, 2003); bicultural and multicultural workplaces (Clyne, 1994; Miller, 1994); and mediated workplace communication (Morand & Ocker, 2002; Hobbs, 2003) (p. 9). Locher (2006) draws attention to the advancement of politeness theory through the works of Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), Fraser (1990), Meier (1990), Held (1995) and Holmes (1995) (p. 250).

Still, it is important to note the first category in which Watts placed literature stemming from Brown and Levinson's politeness model: criticism. Whether it be claims regarding the

theory's oversimplification or generalization (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Locher & Watts, 2005; O'Driscoll, 2007; Wilson, Kim & Meischke, 1991/1992; Xie, He & Lin, 2005); its failure to account for impoliteness (or "(im)politeness") (Bousfield, 2006; Culpeper 1996, 2005; Eelen, 2001); its dedication to speakers' conceptualizations of politeness over those of recipients' (Johnson, Rolfof & Riffee, 2004; Yobuuchi, 2006); its failure to differentiate politeness dynamics among cultures (Ogiermann, 2009); or its internal inconsistencies and shaky epistemological foundations (O'Driscoll, 2007), Brown and Levinson's ideas have been dissected and lambasted in a number of ways. So vehement has some criticism been that Arundale (2006) goes so far as to state that "continuing to explain facework and politeness using Brown and Levinson's theory is no longer productive" (p. 210).

To that end, four different approaches within the social constructionist paradigm now challenge the dominant status of Brown and Levinson's theory: Locher and Watt's (2005) discursive approach, Eelen's (2001) postmodern approach, Arundale's (1999) interactional approach, and Spencer-Oatey's (2005) social psychological approach (Haugh, 2010, p. 7-8).

Even the theorists' themselves acknowledge their model's shortcomings: "Work on interaction as a system thus remains a fundamental research priority, and the area from which *improved conceptualizations of politeness* [emphasis added] are likely to emerge" (Brown & Levinson, 1987 as cited by Arundale, 2006, p. 194-195).

Main Areas of Criticism

The prime areas where many scholars agree Brown and Levinson's politeness theory falters and, as such, have dedicated efforts to advancing research, are in its oversimplification or generalization; its failure to account for impoliteness; and its generality in terms of culture.

Oversimplification

When tackling the subject of politeness, Brown and Levinson seem to oversimplify its complex sociological dimensions (Xie, He & Lin, 2005, p. 440). Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) term the view of politeness as an embellishment of social interaction "naïve" (p. 11) and Wilson, Kim and Meischke (1991/1992) find Brown and Levinson's handling of directives "too conventional" (p. 216). O'Driscoll (2007) states Brown and Levinson's lack of emphasis on situation contingency when conceiving of face limits its value when analyzing real-life talk-in-interaction (p. 468).

Several scholars also hold that calling certain speech acts "polite" is inaccurate in and of itself, claiming "no utterance is inherently polite" (Locher, 2006; Locher & Watts, 2005) or "face threatening" (Arundale, 2006, p. 209). More accurate terms for these types of messages are "appropriate or politic" (Locher, 2006; Meier, 1995; Watts, 1989). What's more, Locher and Watts (2005) argue that Brown and Levinson's theory actually isn't one of politeness at all, but of facework (p. 10).

Impoliteness or (Im)politeness

One of the most wide-ranging criticisms of politeness theories in general came courtesy of Gino Eelen in his 2001 aptly titled book, "Critique of Politeness Theories." Eelen argued that, among other things, these theories suffer conceptually because they value what is polite more than what is impolite (Stewart, 2008, p. 31) or sometimes neglect the inherent variability and argumentatively of impoliteness altogether (Haugh, 2010, p. 26).

Watts (2003), much like he did with his argument for first- and second-order politeness, sought to bring impoliteness into the conversation by outlining two separate ways of discussing the subject. "(Im)politeness$_1$" is "the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members of a language community" and "(im)politeness$_2$" is the theoretical term in a universal theory of politeness that refers to forms of social behaviour preserving mutually shared consideration for others" (as cited by Xie, He & Lin, 2005, p. 449).

Cultural Generality

Ogiermann (2009) argues that "although Brown and Levinson describe social implications of speech acts and the strategies available for performing them as *universal* [emphasis added], empirical research has shown that the pragmatic force…of utterances differs across languages" (p. 190). O'Driscoll (2007) also takes exception with Brown and Levinson's use of the word "universal," particularly regarding negative face, as the concept has been found to be non-existent in many cultures (p. 470). Eslami-Rasekh (2004) supports this notion by stating the concept of "face" as defined by Brown and Levinson does not seem to be universally applicable (p. 182). Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) lament Brown and Levinson's tendency to "overlook the social-embeddedness of 'polite behaviour,' which has implications for cross-cultural research" (p. 14)

Instead of tearing down Brown and Levinson's model due to its failure to account for cultural differences, Yabuuchi (2006) modified their formula to incorporate these variables. In

this revised formula, $Wx = *_1D(S,H) + *_2P(H,S) + *_3Rx$, $*_1$, $*_2$, and $*_3$ represent, respectively, the weights of D, P, and R in * culture (p. 328).

Where Do We Go From Here?: Computer-Mediated Politeness

It is clear Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has sparked volumes of subsequent research (and just as much criticism), but this advanced exploration has predominately centered on physical interactions. It is one thing to maintain politeness strategies when speaking with someone face-to-face or over the phone – circumstances where one's "face" is totally exposed – but an entirely different thing to take these interactions into cyberspace, where physical and/or verbal cues are non-existent. Brown and Levinson's seminal theory has been extrapolated and dissected to account for "real world" interactions to a point where reconstruction may be objectively impossible. One arena where implementations of politeness theory's basic tenants remain nascent, however, is that in computer-mediated communication (CMC).

CMC has been used to define any exchange of information that requires a technological conduit, such as computers, the Internet, or video conferencing (Locher, 2010, p. 1). Exploring how Brown and Levinson's politeness model is utilized during CMC has only recently piqued the interest of communication scholars, particularly to discuss the character of face-threatening instances (Locher, 2010, p. 3). Haugh (2010) and Darics (2010) examined an e-mail and instant-messaging (IM) exchange, respectively, for politeness indicators – the former for what constitutes impoliteness, the latter for how a virtual team maintained politeness during CMC. While both researchers offer valuable insight into CMC, and Darics (2010) suggests useful future analyses on the use of hedging strategies in relation to gender, the manifestation and negotiation of power in IM, and the negotiation and acquisition of politeness norms in various online communities (p. 146), their research does not get at the heart of the question posed in this paper's introduction. That is, are one's dual needs for appreciation and freedom from imposition (according to Brown and Levinson) able to be sufficiently achieved during this age of overwhelming CMC?

The answer may be surprising.

I would argue that through e-mails and in IM conversations, chat rooms and listserves, one's use of negative and positive politeness to mitigate face-threatening acts *increases* due to the lack of aforementioned physical and/or verbal cues.

If all one has to achieve one's "universal needs" of appreciation and freedom from intrusion are words on a screen, it stands to reason that person will construct those words much more carefully than if the same message was conveyed interpersonally. In turn, that same person would expect the CMC he/she receives to be just as carefully crafted.

The key to this idea, of course, is the supposition that Brown and Levinson's formula (*Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R)* is indeed accurate. Writing an e-mail containing a request to a best friend (thus infringing on his/her negative face) takes a much different shape than a similar e-mail to one's boss. This concept is supported by Haugh (2010), who found that "evaluations of impoliteness are not made independently of the identities attributed to the persons concerned" (p. 25). It would seem this idea would hold true in IM communication and chat rooms as well.

Also interesting to consider is the extent to which the loss of a physical presence or voice during CMC levels the playing field for those typically shy or insecure, and how the negotiation of politeness and impoliteness during online interaction affects identity construction and the negotiation of face (Locher, 2010, p. 3). Will these individuals grow more confident during e-mail, IM, chat room and listserve conversations, especially if with whom they are communicating is physically unknown to them? Will this shift in attitude thus create a greater urge to push for, and exchange, mitigation of positive and negative face-threats?

An Experiment and Future Research in Politeness Theory

A way to examine this theory would be to conduct an experiment in which participants are asked to convey the same request and/or refusal in-person, over the phone, and through various CMC methods to a stranger, a relative, an acquaintance and a good friend, and then have that same person receive the same messages through the same media. Once completed, analysts could examine the phrasing of the person's refusal and/or requests for corresponding politeness indicators as well as interview the person on how he/she perceived the messages received in terms of negative and positive face-threat.

Beyond this isolated experiment, politeness theory in CMC begs for advanced research. With technology increasing by the day, and the line between politeness and impoliteness in dispute, it is important to understand how – and if – civility and the right to "universal needs" can be maintained in discourse.

Conclusion

       This paper sought to provide a modified review of literature on Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's politeness theory as well as examine the key concepts that define the theory. An exploration into the ways the original theory has been broadened was conducted in an effort to establish the next logical step for research: examining politeness in computer-mediated communication (CMC). An original idea was then put forth that interactants are likely to utilize Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies *to a greater degree* in CMC than in interpersonal interaction due to the absence of physical and/or verbal cues to help mitigate face-threats. An experiment was then posed to test this new idea. Whether this experiment would or would not lend support to this new idea may not matter, however. The fact that Brown and Levinson's politeness theory remains a galvanizing model to this day, and that it has already been witnessed and documented in CMC, underscores its value for inclusion in future research on human communication – in reality as well as virtually.

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