The linguistics of politeness and social relations

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14.1 Introduction

It is with renewed appreciation for the size of the task that I come to writing the present chapter. The number of special issues of journals dedicated to im/politeness these days comes to two or three per year, while in the last four years alone, articles pertaining to im/politeness have appeared in journals as diverse as Administrative Science Quarterly, International Journal of Human–Computer Studies, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience, Journal of Language and Social Psychology, Journal of Pragmatics, Patient Education and Counseling, Research on Language and Social Interaction and The International Journal of Press/Politics, to mention but a few – not to forget the dedicated Journal of Politeness Research, which celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2015. In the Journal of Pragmatics alone, the number of articles tackling im/politeness in the same time span comes to over 200 (that is, over four times per issue), while the number of publications that cite Brown and Levinson’s seminal essay on the topic numbers over 20,000 in the first half of 2014, according to Google Scholar. I could go on… You get the picture: im/politeness is hot! And, like all things hot, it must be handled with care. Yet, proceed we must, lest this topic of growing importance to linguists (and many others besides) remains unspoken for in the definitive handbook in the field.

The difficulties facing the scholar of im/politeness these days do not stop with the explosion in the number of publications mentioned above. The proliferation of theoretical frameworks and new terminology make navigating the field a highly perilous affair. Adding to the mix of combat metaphors, im/politeness research is also being bombarded by a plethora of new data obtained by means of novel methodologies (most recently, online experimental ones, such as reaction times, eye-tracking and Event Related Potentials or ERPs) faster than it can account for them and assess their significance for the theoretical frameworks at play.

At this point, a newcomer to the field might ask: Why all the fuss? To what do im/politeness studies owe their renewed appeal? In fact, the question could be reversed: why, one might ask, has it taken so long for linguists and others studying the social dynamics of language to take an active interest in how people relate to each other through language? My
tentative answer to this second question may seem baffling at first. Brown and Levinson’s (1978/1987) seminal essay, which more or less single-handedly established the field nearly forty years ago, also apparently provided all the answers, leaving little to be added by future researchers – or so it seemed, until critiques of their work started proliferating in the 1990s, peaking in the early 2000s. When the foundational work in a field is so accomplished as to remain the point of reference relative to which all subsequent theories position themselves (cf. Leech 2014), and whence theorists outside the field begin their investigations, it should come as no surprise that academic debate is slow to take off. Im/politeness studies are, however, making up for it quite impressively.

14.2 Brown and Levinson’s framework and critiques thereof

In a nutshell, Brown and Levinson’s idea was this: people are not just information-processing beings. They also have social needs (or wants), what Brown and Levinson, following Goffman (1967), called ‘face’ – and this makes a difference to how they talk. Specifically, it pushes them to adjust what they say in order to secure both others’ admiration and approval (‘positive face’) and their own autonomy and independence (‘negative face’). Some speech acts (requests, offers, apologies, complaints, compliments and many more) intrinsically threaten (the speaker’s or the hearer’s, positive or negative) face. To get their point across and at the same time remain on good terms with their addressees when performing one of these acts, speakers must phrase it in such a way as to avoid face-threat. What this means is that (rational) speakers select from several options, hierarchically ordered, a strategy that is analogous to the level of face-threat that the act carries. The level of face-threat – or Weightiness (W) of the Face-Threatening Act (FTA) x – is in turn determined by three sociological variables, which depend on the relationship between the interlocutors and on the culture at hand. Distance (D) is a measure of how close the interlocutors are to each other and depends on how much they are alike as well as how well they know each other; it is a symmetric relationship, meaning that it is the same whether measured from the perspective of the speaker (S) or from that of the hearer (H). Power (P), on the other hand, is a measure of the degree of (physical, emotional or social) control that the hearer has over the speaker and is an asymmetric relationship, meaning that, if the hearer has power over the speaker, then the speaker is powerless with respect to the hearer. Finally, Ranking (R) is a measure of the effort needed to comply with different acts. These three variables, compounded in the formula in (1), guide speakers’ selections from among five different sets of strategies that essentially reflect increasing degrees of indirectness (see Figure 14.1).

\[ W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x \]

The five sets of strategies range from ‘bald on record’ for acts of minimal Weightiness (e.g. mundane invitations such as *Come in*), through ‘positive politeness’ (strategies that make the addressee feel good, e.g. using endearment terms such as *honey* or *sweetie*), ‘negative politeness’ (strategies that respect the speaker’s or the addressee’s private space, such as asking about the other’s abilities or wishes rather than presuming to know what they are) and ‘off record’ (strategies that do not directly state the FTA), to ‘don’t do the FTA’ for acts of the greatest Weightiness. The underlying assumption is that personal space and freedom of action are more important than group belonging; therefore, as the stakes get higher, strategies that safeguard the former (negative politeness, off-record) are preferred.
To see how this works out in practice, consider how the same speech act may be phrased in different ways that reflect the social dynamics between speaker and hearer. Take a request to hurry up. Addressed to one’s child while preparing to go to school in the morning (low D, low P,1 low R), it may be phrased directly as a bare imperative: *Hurry up!* (baldly on record). Exchanged between spouses getting ready to go out at night (where P is presumably a bit more evenly distributed), something like *Will you hurry up, honey?* (positive politeness) might be more appropriate. Addressed to a colleague at work (a relationship of greater D compared to the last two), the same request might come out more like *Um, I don’t mean to rush you but do you think you could hurry up a bit?* (negative politeness). Addressed to one’s boss, on the other hand (this time both D and P should be greater), one might refrain from stating the act requested and merely hint at it: *I think we might be late* (off-record). Finally, addressed to someone many times removed from the speaker (e.g. the head of the organization where one works), one may choose not to perform the act at all (i.e. silence).

Before carrying on with a broader assessment of Brown and Levinson’s proposals, a couple of issues with regard to this illustration ought to be noted. First, it is meant to reflect both the speaker’s selection of an appropriate strategy and the hearer’s interpretation of it; in other words, it is meant to be a model of both language production and language comprehension. In the case of the speaker, she will start out with certain assumptions about the values of D, P and R and select a strategy based on those – moving from the formula in (1) to the strategies in Figure 14.1. In the case of the hearer, he will work his way back from the actual utterance produced by the speaker to Wx, i.e. the sum of the assumed values of D, P and R,2 moving in the opposite direction, from the strategies in Figure 14.1 to the formula in (1). If he agrees with the speaker’s overall assessment of Wx, politeness will have been served.

It is possible, however, that the speaker’s and hearer’s ways of assessing D, P and R might diverge. Brown and Levinson highlight, in this respect, the existence of ‘positive politeness cultures,’ ‘cultures [where] the general level of Wx tends to remain low’ such as ‘the Western USA, some New Guinea cultures and the Mbuti pygmies,’ and ‘negative politeness cultures,’ ‘those lands of standoffish creatures like the British (in the eyes of the Americans), the Japanese (in the eyes of the British), the Malagasy […] and the Brahmans of India’ (1987: 245). While Brown and Levinson do not explicitly say this, it is to be expected that interlocutors from different cultures may end up with different assessments of D, P and R and some amount of awareness of the other’s culture and of perspective-taking may be necessary to avoid politeness misunderstandings in this case.
While differences in D, P and R assessments due to cultural differences may be handled in this way, the model has little to say about fluctuations in D, P and R values due to more subjective factors, such as the degree of mutual sympathy or ‘liking’ between interlocutors (but see Slugoski and Turnbull 1988), or the speaker’s (or, for that matter, the addressee’s) emotional state (but see Vergis and Terkourafi, forthcoming). The fact that additional factors such as these can affect politeness assessments has been used to challenge the adequacy of Brown and Levinson’s three sociological variables to capture all of the factors relevant to politeness assessments and to account for situated politeness assessments in actual data.

A second point that complicates the application of their model to actual data is the fact that there is no such thing as the same speech act: a request to one’s child to hurry up in order to get to school on time may be said to be ultimately to the benefit of the child, making it quite different from a more self-interested request to one’s spouse to hurry up in order to have dinner with one’s colleagues – while, of course, even the aforementioned request to one’s child may be (simultaneously) motivated by self-interest, if the parent is also trying to get to work on time. In other words, R changes depending on the specifics of each situation, not least who is talking to whom, such that Rx is not, in the end, independent of the values of D and P, despite Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 80–1) assertions to the contrary. Nor are D and P independent of each other (Holtgraves and Yang 1990: 725; Watts et al. 1992: 9; Tannen and Kakava 1992: 13): sometimes, the lower the distance (D) between interlocutors, the higher the amount of control one has over the other (P); suffice it to think of two people in an intimate relationship to see that this is the case.

Despite these difficulties in applying it to real data, Brown and Levinson’s model has been extremely influential, establishing notions such as face, positive politeness and negative politeness as terms of art and setting the agenda that dominates the field to this day. This is no doubt due both to its comprehensiveness, covering a wide spectrum of linguistic choices, as well as its presenting us with a coherent set of predictions that may be tested out on empirical data. Yet, for all its merits, their model has also been widely criticized on a number of counts.

To begin with, critics have rejected the authors’ definition of face as individual wants, pointing out that in Goffman’s own definition, face is a much more dynamic notion that is ‘diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter’ (1967: 7; emphasis added) and ‘on loan from society’ (1967: 10; emphasis added). In contrast, Brown and Levinson’s talk of intrinsic FTAs makes it sound as if face concerns only kick in when one is about to perform one of those acts. However, it is now well documented that even the interpretation of such seemingly innocuous items as some and if can be influenced by face concerns. In a series of experiments, Bonnefon and colleagues (2015) showed that whether listeners take some to mean ‘some but not all’ or ‘some and possibly all’ depends on whether the information purveyed is flattering, beneficial, or otherwise welcome to the addressee. The less that is the case, the more the speaker’s use of some is likely to be interpreted as a face-saving device designed to spare the addressee from being told the bad news (the stronger statement all) right in their face. This experimental work puts some empirical flesh on what researchers in intercultural communication have been claiming for some time, namely that ‘there is no faceless communication’ (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 38). In other words, even when not openly engaging in facework (by, e.g. saying please and thank you), interactants’ use of language always has consequences for face – an observation that can be used to motivate the much coveted distinction between Politeness 1 and Politeness 2 (about which more later).

Returning to Brown and Levinson, their definition of face as ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ (1987: 61) has been taken to mean that face is an
individual possession that can be projected outwards, whereas in fact face does not reside in
individual speakers but rather in speaker–addressee pairs (it is ‘relational’) and it emerges
in interaction between them (it is ‘emergent’; cf. Arundale 2006; Terkourafi 2007). This last
point is particularly important, if we are to break free from the notion that individuals are
independently endowed with face, which they bring with them into their interactions with
others. Exclusive talk of Face-Threatening Acts by Brown and Levinson suggests that
individuals have only to lose by engaging in interaction, making the ‘lone wolf’ option
sound more appealing than the alternative (call it the ‘social butterfly’). While that is in line
with the authors’ prioritizing negative over positive face, and correspondingly ranking
negative politeness strategies above positive politeness ones (i.e. reserved for more serious
FTAs), it falls short of explaining how face comes into existence in the first place or the fact
that it can also be routinely enhanced. Yet, there is plenty of evidence for both. For instance,
Barros-García (forthcoming) discusses the (Peninsular) Spanish propensity to pepper
conversation among friends with compliments, so much so that these routine compliments
are not responded to or even noticed (although their absence would be). This suggests that,
rather than being felt to be face-threatening (as in Brown and Levinson’s framework, 1987:
66), these routine compliments are part of Spanish interlocutors’ normal way of speaking, a
culturally and situationally expected mode of interaction which, without consciously aiming
to constitute face, does precisely that – as evidenced by the fact that it is the omission
of these acts, rather than their performance, that would potentially damage face (by failing to
bring it into existence). In this sense, Barros-García’s research also documents the existence
of Face-Enhancing Acts (also termed Face-Boosting or Face-Anointing Acts), that is, acts
whose performance is not intended to remedy a potential face-threat but rather manifests
gratuitous politeness – a verbal offering which lubricates the wheels of sociality without, for
that matter, having always been made necessary by a prior transgression.3

Making matters more complicated still, one aspect of face may be threatened while the
other is simultaneously enhanced. For instance, when a young mother asks someone to look
after her baby briefly, she imposes on the addressee (threatens his/her negative face) by
limiting his/her freedom of action. Yet at the same time she flatters them (enhances his/her
positive face) by entrusting them with such a delicate task (cf. Turner 1996: 4–5). It can
therefore be misleading to speak of intrinsic FTAs to an aspect of the addressee’s or the
speaker’s face: both aspects of face and both interlocutors’ faces can be implicated at the
same time.

Coming to how linguistic strategies relate to social variables, and more specifically to
Brown and Levinson’s prediction that the degree of politeness is proportionate to, among
others, the Distance between interlocutors, the most forceful refutation of this claim lies
perhaps in the findings of Wolfson (1988), which she summarized under the term the ‘bulge’
phenomenon. The bulge phenomenon refers to the fact that the most negotiation appears to
take place between acquaintances, who are about half-way along the Distance axis, while
the least negotiation is to be found between intimates and strangers alike, who occupy its
extremes. While that makes sense, considering that with intimates and strangers possibilities
of future interaction are mostly pre-set such that there is little point in investing extra effort
trying to change that, it is contrary to the prediction of Brown and Levinson that the most
politeness should be found among those who know each other the least (high D).

More generally, the association of politeness with indirectness in their model has been the
object of intense scrutiny. Blum-Kulka (1987) was perhaps the first to point out that the
amount of inferential work required to extract politeness from the speaker’s utterance may
constitute an imposition on the hearer’s cognitive resources in its own right, counteracting
the degree of politeness communicated by more indirect utterances. Using evidence from Hebrew and English, she argued that politeness lies in achieving a balance between coerciveness and clarity, such that tipping the balance in either of these directions can result in impoliteness; in other words, being too indirect (using off-record indirectness) can be as impolite as being too direct – albeit for different reasons. This balance (politeness) is best achieved by on-record or conventional indirectness (negative politeness), which thus emerged as the polite mode *par excellence*. This finding has since been replicated in a number of experimental studies, most notably by Holtgraves and Yang (1990), who found that hints (off-record indirectness) were not unequivocally polite for the American and Korean speakers they tested – but also in a number of observational ones (e.g. Márquez Reiter 2000; Terkourafi 2001), who noted the prevalence of conventional indirectness over other modes of polite behavior in a variety of languages. Most recently, Culpeper (2011: 186–93) found that conventional indirectness is the least likely to tip over into impoliteness, even when used in an inappropriate context. In a series of experiments asking subjects to rate the impoliteness of various commands – direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect – in both high to low (e.g. a superior talking to a subordinate) and low to high power conditions, he and a colleague found that subjects resisted the idea that conventional indirectness could be impolite, at least more so than was the case for the other two strategies. Similar results obtained in a number of studies suggest that previous research may have overstated the association of politeness with indirectness and that it is the relationship between politeness and conventionalization that merits a closer look. Before proceeding to do just that, we turn first to some more recent developments in the area of im/politeness research.

### 14.3 Recent developments in im/politeness research

One of the most important steps forward in im/politeness research since the mid-1990s has been to point out that the meaning of the term ‘politeness’ itself cannot be taken for granted. Rather, there are at least two ways of defining it and, depending on which one we choose, we are likely to end up with different sets of phenomena to explain and different ways of explaining them. On the one hand, politeness can take its meaning from the everyday word ‘polite’ as it is routinely used to single out and explicitly characterize particular types of behavior. Politeness in this sense is the stuff of etiquette books and advice columns. There we read, for example, that it is ‘polite’ to say *please* and *thank you*, and to let ladies go first. This understanding of politeness has been called first-order politeness or Politeness 1, for short.

Clearly, definitions of Politeness 1 vary widely across time and space. For instance, in China it is traditionally considered polite to refuse an invitation three times before accepting it; it is also considered polite to burp in appreciation of a meal. Both behaviors would be met with quite different interpretations in a US context. Similarly, smiling is a sign of politeness and conviviality among Europeans but it can come across as overbearing or signal embarrassment among East Asians. Even the two behaviors mentioned above – saying *please* and *thank you*, and letting ladies go first – are not universally polite: Spaniards, among others, have ways of thanking that do not involve saying ‘thank you,’ which sounds distant and cold to native ears (Hickey 2005); while letting ladies go first is not customary in Japan and may be frowned upon as sexist in some feminist circles.

As some contemporary theorists have noted, not only what is considered polite but also whether politeness itself is considered a good thing can be contested. Mills (2003) makes a
case for politeness as white middle-class women’s discourse, an argument that can be traced back to Robin Lakoff’s earlier remarks on women’s language (Lakoff 1975). Drawing on her own experience of American women in conversation, Lakoff noticed that a lot of the mechanisms traditionally associated with politeness in English (using hedges such as sort of and you know, tag questions, euphemisms and indirect requests, and avoiding strong swear words) were actually typical of women’s language. She interpreted this as a reflection of women’s powerless position in society and went on to propose a power-based explanation for the differences found in men’s and women’s speech. On this view, polite language is powerless language and, having come to be considered the normal way in which women speak, pins them down to a subordinate position, lest they be chastised for not sounding ‘feminine enough.’ Although this view, which became known as the ‘dominance’ approach, has been challenged in subsequent work, it proved enormously influential in the field of gender studies and beyond, constituting the first serious attempt to catalogue and explain gender-based differences in discourse.

In a different vein, Watts (2002) pointed out that the close relationship between polite language and standard/educated language in eighteenth century Britain created a situation whereby ‘polite’ was invested with negative overtones, ranging from standoffish to downright hypocritical. In fact, there is good (historical) reason why politeness in modern Western societies ended up with a bad rap. Early treatises on politeness associated it with morality, often of a religious nature. As power shifted from the Church to the feudal Court in early modern times and European societies became increasingly secular, politeness was also increasingly decoupled from morality and viewed as something that could be cultivated independently of it in the name of social advancement, much to the dismay of religious authors, who did not waste an opportunity to castigate such opportunistic behavior (Terkoura 2011: 168–70). As a result, few would deny that politeness can occasionally be associated with ‘superficial good manners purely as a matter of form’ (Leech 2014), making it a vice rather than a virtue of those who display it.

Not only do the terms ‘politeness’ and ‘polite’ not mean the same for everyone, a word for ‘polite’ is not available in all languages (Terkoura 2005: 242–3). That does not mean that those languages in which a single-word translational equivalent is unavailable do not equally have behaviors that are prescribed or frowned upon. However, it does mean that relying on the characterization of these behaviors as ‘polite’ or ‘impolite’ respectively in order to identify them may not get us very far.

As a remedy to this situation, one may turn to the second way of defining politeness, as a technical term explicitly and unambiguously defined by the analyst in relation to other terms taken from the theoretical framework s/he is working with. Politeness in this second sense is not found outside of textbooks and academic conferences and is referred to as second-order politeness, or Politeness 2. In Brown and Levinson’s model, for example, politeness would be defined with respect to the notion of face-threat avoidance: those behaviors that avoid threatening the speaker’s or the hearer’s positive or negative face are characterized as polite. In this way, a number of behaviors that may not be explicitly characterized as ‘polite’ (in the sense of Politeness 1) can still end up under this rubric (as Politeness 2) and be accounted for under the same model. This is especially pertinent to instances of positive politeness (e.g. using in-group identity markers such as BrE and AusE mate, AmE dude and AAE nigga), which would not pass muster outside the specific groups that use them and would thus be left out of an account of Politeness 1 dealing with behaviors explicitly characterized as ‘polite’ – although their use (or lack thereof) clearly has implications for face, and therefore falls within the purview of a Politeness 2 definition anchored on this notion.

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While this might seem like a promising way forward, it is not devoid of its own set of problems. For, as Eelen (2001: 48–76) has argued in detail, even accounts built on the notion of Politeness 2 can unwittingly incorporate Politeness 1 understandings. To give but two examples, drawn from two of the most prominent frameworks in the field: the placement of off-record above on-record (conventional) indirectness in Brown and Levinson’s model seems to be more a culturally-biased assumption than a universal trait of polite discourse, as the studies by Blum-Kulka (1987) and Holtgraves and Yang (1990) cited earlier seem to suggest; while the same is true of at least some of the maxims of Leech’s (1983) Interpersonal Rhetoric (e.g. the Phatic maxim: ‘Avoid silence’).

These problems point to a more serious difficulty with the distinction between Politeness 1 and Politeness 2, namely, that completely disentangling these two notions may be not only practically impossible but also theoretically undesirable. This is because both notions are ultimately evaluative, albeit in different ways. In the case of Politeness 1, participants undertake an evaluation of the speaker’s behavior with respect to socially accepted (‘overt’ in the sense of Trudgill 1972) norms. In the case of Politeness 2, on the other hand, an evaluation is again implicated but this time it may be against either overt or covert (group) norms. In other words, while what is polite 1 may be paraphrased as ‘proper,’ what is polite 2 is merely ‘adequate’ to the situation; the former is necessarily a subset of the latter. A more promising avenue to explore may therefore be to capitalize on their intimate relationship and attempt to ground definitions of the latter in what is shared about understandings of the former (Terkourafi 2011).

The distinction between Politeness 1 and Politeness 2, first proposed by Watts et al. (1992), is not unrelated to another recent sea change in politeness studies: the rise of im/politeness studies. Once the topic of investigation is shifted from a more or less finite set of politeness strategies to all kinds of ways in which language can impact face, it becomes clear that what interlocutors do with words is not limited to avoiding face-threat: sometimes they actively engage in it, others do so by accident, while others yet engage in unselfconscious or even gratuitous face-enhancing. The term im/politeness has been coined precisely to reflect the widened scope of the phenomena studied. Coupled with the observation that all use of language impacts face (see above), this leads to one possible definition of Politeness 2 as all linguistic behavior seen through the lens of its potential to impact (threaten and/or enhance) face. The widened scope of im/politeness research has allowed attention to shift away from the two poles of politeness and impoliteness to the numerous types of behavior that lie between them. In fact, one of the most active areas in im/politeness research today is charting this middle ground, populated by terms such as politic behavior (Watts 1989), unmarked politeness (Terkourafi 2001), non-politeness (Kerbrat Orecchioni 2011), and mock impoliteness (Haugh and Bousfield 2012), among others.

While formally the counterpart of politeness, the challenges facing a theory of impoliteness are different. First, there is the difficulty in collecting (especially observational) data: no one likes to admit to being rude, much less caught on tape doing just that. Awareness that a session is being audio/video recorded seems to act as a surefire deterrent against providing data for the impoliteness researcher. But the asymmetry between politeness and impoliteness does not stop here. So long as politeness can be assumed to be what is going on in most everyday encounters when participants feel that their face-needs are being met, the acquisition of politeness too can be put down to an informal statistical process of deducing and reproducing what is seen to be habitual in different contexts (Terkourafi 2001).

The acquisition of impoliteness, however, is a different story. As Culpeper (2011)
has convincingly argued, metalinguistic data (explicit instruction, proscriptions about what not to say etc.) are at least as much, if not more, important for acquiring impoliteness, as it is less frequently experienced first-hand and therefore harder to model based on observation alone.

A special feature of impoliteness is its intimate association with emotion. A negative emotional reaction (2011: 255) is in fact the single most common ingredient unifying instances of impoliteness, which can, for the rest, be creative or conventionalized (or even, institutionalized, as in army boot camp), intensified or pretend (as in mock impoliteness), intended or unintended, targeting another’s face or sociality rights, and legitimized or not (2011: 254–5). The close link between impoliteness and (negative) emotion is a final point on which politeness and impoliteness come apart. While impoliteness is almost universally guaranteed to arouse feelings of anger and being hurt, politeness can trigger a whole gamut of emotions, including passing unnoticed (consider the routine reception of a Can you pass the salt? request at the dinner table).

14.4 Politeness, conventionalization and identity

An especially lively area in im/politeness research today concerns the relationship between face and identity. The two terms seem to share quite a few aspects, such that researchers on both sides are increasingly seeing little difference between them (Spencer-Oatey 2007; Locher 2008; Edwards 2009; Ruhi 2010; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013). This raises interesting questions about the relationship of face to im/politeness and whether ultimately we need face to explain im/politeness (as Brown and Levinson originally suggested) or this can be done independently of it. Lately, a number of researchers have argued for the separation of face from im/politeness (e.g. Haugh and Bargiela-Chiappini 2010; O’Driscoll 2011; Haugh 2013; see also the papers in Journal of Pragmatics 58(1), special issue on ‘Interpersonal Pragmatics’), which is also in line with an increasing interest in participants’ own understandings of politeness and impoliteness (Politeness 1). Since face is at the heart of the theoretical definition of im/politeness (Politeness 2; see §14.3), this issue is central to the feasibility of theorizing Politeness 2 and, ultimately, upholding a distinction between Politeness 1 and Politeness 2. In this context, a re-examination of the relationship of face to identity could help us clarify things and set the study of im/politeness on a proper footing.

The two notions indeed share several aspects. Like face (see §14.2), identity emerges in relationships with others. This means that both identity and face take different forms depending on who those others are and what is the wider context of the interaction. Take the example of gender. Not only can one perform the same gender identity in different ways with different addressees (consider how masculinity is linguistically constructed with one’s buddies versus one’s partner), but one may also shift position on the gender identity spectrum depending on the audience (the same person holding a newborn baby may act more feminine than at other times). But gender is only one among several dimensions along which identities are routinely enacted. Gender, age, class, ethnic, professional, religious, political and so on identities are analytical abstractions: they have no independent existence of their own but are always co-instantiated in flesh-and-blood individuals, with different dimensions being foregrounded depending on the circumstances. This suggests that identities are not attached to flesh-and-blood individuals but rather to the social roles or capacities in which they relate to others, and can, therefore, like the latter, be multiple. All of these apply to face as well. Because face resides not in individual speakers but in speaker–addressee pairs (or Self–
Other pairs, to be precise, with Self and Other referring again not to flesh-and-blood individuals but rather to the social roles or capacities in which we relate to each other), we have many faces, as many as there are Others involved in the interaction (Terkourafi 2007). Our behavior, then, impacts our face in the eyes of each of these Others. Interestingly, this can lead us to threaten an Other’s face in order to have our face be constituted in the eyes of yet a different Other (who may be present or to whom the interaction may be reported later on), which provides an elegant explanation for rudeness, an otherwise risky strategy (Terkourafi 2008).

Another aspect common to both identity and face that follows from their being relational and emergent is that both involve a co-opting by the addressee of the self-image that the speaker is – wittingly or unwittingly – projecting. Speakers cannot go about simply assuming that the self-image they wish to project is unproblematically shared by those around them. Rather, through their linguistic behavior, they put forward a claim or ‘bid’ (for identity or face), which must be recognized and ratified by the recipient in order to be fully realized. In other words, for a particular identity or face to be constituted, speakers must secure the recipient’s ‘uptake.’

This brings us to the final and possibly most important aspect that face and identity have in common: the fact that they can only emerge against the background of pre-existing social groupings. In the case of identity, a reference to groupness is perhaps the only aspect of the term that remains constant across both early and later definitions, with most everyone agreeing that claiming an identity amounts to aligning ourselves with one social group rather than another through our use of language. For instance, Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 182) write:

> We can only behave according to the behavioural patterns of groups that we find it desirable to identify with to the extent that:
> (i) we can identify the groups
> (ii) we have both adequate access to the groups and ability to analyse their behavioural patterns
> (iii) the motivation to join the groups is sufficiently powerful, and is either reinforced or reversed by feedback from the groups
> (iv) we have the ability to modify our behaviour.

Similarly, in his most recent work, Edwards notes:

> Our personal characteristics derive from our socialization within the group (or, rather, groups) to which we belong; one’s particular social context defines that part of the larger human pool of potential from which a personal identity can be constructed. Thus, individual identities will be both components and reflections of particular social (or cultural) ones and the latter will always be, to some extent at least, stereotypic in nature because of their necessary generality across the individual components.

(Edwards 2009: 20)

What both of these definitions agree on is that a claim or ‘bid’ for identity cannot be put forward in a social vacuum but always draws on existing social groupings – and conversely, a claim or ‘bid’ for identity cannot be intelligible to an audience and, ultimately, succeed, unless it draws on existing social groupings. This is also true of face. As I point out in Terkourafi (2005: 249):
In acting to achieve this dual objective [of fulfilling his/her face-needs, and of doing so at least cost], the speaker’s options are constrained by what s/he takes the addressee to be able to recognize, and thereby ratify. […] To choose to be rude to you by using an offensive gesture, I must think that you are familiar with this gesture, and that you attribute to it the same negative value. In other words, I can only be rude to you in a way that you recognize as being rude. […] When the addressee recognizes and ratifies the speaker’s behavior, both as to its intention, and as to its face-constituting potential, as manifested by his/her uptake, this behavior enters their common stock of collective experiences. It can then serve as the model for future interactions, and through repeated ratification can take on a life of its own […]. This is how norms of polite behavior are born.

The reliance of both identity and face on what is intelligible to the addressee because it is already familiar to him/her through previous interactions brings to the fore the importance of conventionalization to the achievement of both. By conventionalization, I mean a process of repeated use of an expression in situations that are sufficiently similar to be classified as instances of the same type, such that an increasingly stronger link is established between the expression and the situation at hand. The expression, then, becomes the normal way of achieving a particular practical goal in this situation (say, verbally ordering food at a restaurant from a waiter standing by your table), making all other ways of achieving the same goal in this situation (say, ordering food at a restaurant by tapping away on an iPad) appear ‘odd,’ if not downright ‘anti-intimate’ and wrong.¹⁰

An opportune metaphor to help us understand how the usual way of doing something can become the right way of doing it (making all other ways automatically dispreferred or wrong) is that of table manners. Different cultures around the world have different ways of helping themselves to the food in front of them: some use chopsticks and a bowl held close to their face, others use knives, forks and spoons to reach out to food from a plate in front of them, and yet others eat by hand following strict rules about how food should be picked up and delivered to one’s mouth. What is interesting is that, depending on the setting one is in, not following the established convention for that setting is almost certain to raise eyebrows and place the culprit in a group separate from the rest of the attendees. Moreover, much as we may be intellectually aware that there are different ways of doing things, typically we can hardly suppress the gut feeling that a different way of doing them is simply off. It is in this way that social conventions, including im/politeness conventions, achieve their function of social regulation, that is, uniting those who are alike and separating those who are not, or distinguishing ‘friend’ from ‘foe.’

At this point, a few things are worth making explicit. First, identity- or face-constituting are not practical goals in and of themselves. When we pick up our fork and knife to eat, have coffee in the morning, or slip on a pair of jeans, we do not do so in order to lay claim to a particular identity or face but first and foremost in order to feed and dress ourselves. Identity and face, in other words, fall out as by-products of doing what we normally do, without us putting any special effort in achieving them – at least, they do so in the eyes of those familiar with these particular ways of doing things. In this sense, identity and face are not so much a matter of recognizing the speaker’s intention as of sharing the same set of sociocultural conventions that make the speaker’s actions intelligible to us. That does not mean that identity and face cannot become goals in themselves, as when we might go out of our way to eat the way our hosts eat even though that may not be our normal way of eating, in order to honor them. However, at that point, rather than falling out as a by-product of our normal
way of doing things, achieving a certain identity or face involves a conscious choice of means – and while that is certainly possible, it is way too cumbersome to engage in all the time, considering all of our behavior has consequences for identity and face all of the time. An account of im/politeness along these lines finds support in the overwhelming preference for conventional rather than off-record ways of being indirect attested cross-linguistically (see above), which suggests that the correct equation may be not ‘the more indirect, the more polite’ (as proposed by Brown and Levinson 1987; see Figure 14.1) but rather ‘the more conventional, the more (routinely) polite,’ leaving open the possibility that increasing degrees of non-conventionality may be associated with either increasing politeness or increasing impoliteness.

Until now, I have been discussing face and identity as if they were one and the same notion. However, the last point to be noted is also the one where, in my opinion, they come apart. And that is the degree to which they are emotionally invested. In a recent article, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2013) makes a convincing case that face and identity are closely interconnected, if not identical. Noting that the two are virtually interchangeable in Goffman’s own writings over time, she writes:

> Identities can be verified, partially verified or not verified by other agents. Verification/Non-verification is associated with very positive/negative emotions. These emotions, which are usually associated with face [...] are also crucially connected with identity. Those positive/negative emotions associated with the maintenance/enhancement/threat to face can then be associated as well with the verification/non-verification of an identity. Thus, im/politeness evaluations can be tied to identity, not just to face.

(Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013: 17)

Despite fully agreeing with this account, I believe that it also contains the seeds of a potential separation of face from identity, which can be found in the duality (positive or negative) of the emotions associated with verification or non-verification of one’s identity claims. For, while these emotions are caused by verification or not of one’s identity, they are not identical to it but rather an independent consequence. To see that this is so, consider the emotional impact of non-verification of our gender identity by our partner as opposed to by a stranger in the street. Although in both cases this will be an affront to our self-image, the affront (what Brown and Levinson would have called a ‘threat’ to our face) will be much greater coming from our partner with whom this identity is much more relevant than from someone we will probably never see again. Moreover, the association of verification with positive emotions and of non-verification with negative emotions does not always hold. Rather, verification of our identity can be accompanied by negative emotions, as when someone’s accusatory tone at our religious affiliation at once verifies that affiliation and constitutes a threat to our face by showing that s/he does not approve of it. In other words, the two processes, of identity- and face-constituting, are triggered simultaneously but operate at different levels: while identity has a distinctly qualitative aspect – it can take a value among several possibilities and is the ‘what’ is done – face is the interactional consequence of having done it ‘right’ (in the familiar way) or not and moves between a dual axis of positive (‘friend’) versus negative (‘foe’) affect (cf. Terkourafi 2007). If this suggestion is along the correct lines, then identity and face can indeed be distinguished from each other and the latter placed at the basis of a theoretical definition of Politeness 2 as ‘all linguistic behavior seen through the lens of its potential to impact (threaten and/or enhance) face.’
14.5 Conclusions

In this general overview of the linguistics of politeness and social relations, I have attempted to provide a bird’s-eye view of the field from its inception to the debates that are currently exercising scholars. As can be seen, much progress has been made toward broader and more interdisciplinary accounts and understandings of politeness and impoliteness, while at the same time, little is agreed upon between researchers. Nevertheless, some themes remain stable across this broad array of perspectives. One of these is the importance of conventionalization, which empirical studies have shown to be central to the achievement of im/politeness. This has redirected attention away from individual speakers’ calculations of indirectness and toward the boundaries on speakers’ creativity imposed by social norms and conventions. A second theme is the fact that evaluations of politeness and impoliteness are emotionally invested. This means that being polite or impolite through language arouses strong feelings of like and dislike among participants, further promoting or curtailing their relationships – a finding which places the study of im/politeness firmly at the center of the fascinating and little explored interface of language with emotions. Future studies of im/politeness can be expected to shed new light on these and further questions, guaranteeing that politeness and impoliteness will remain central areas of sociopragmatic enquiry in years to come.

Notes

1 Remember that P is assessed from the perspective of the hearer: the more control the hearer has over the speaker, the higher P is.
2 Note that because the values of D, P and R are compounded in one figure (W), it is possible for the speaker and the hearer to agree on their estimation of W without for that matter agreeing on the specific values of D, P and Rx. In this way, Brown and Levinson’s formula leaves significant leeway for politeness to be communicated, without requiring that it be an exact science. Considering how pervasive occasions requiring some form of politeness are, that is a good thing.
3 The fact that, for Brown and Levinson, politeness, be it positive or negative, always amounts to remedial action is made evident by the centrality of the notion of the ‘virtual offence’ to their argument (1987: 1) as well as the example of compliments as a way to offset the imposition entailed by a request (1987: 93).
4 It is important to clarify though that, as the distinction had not been proposed at the time their essay was being written, they do not explicitly define politeness or position themselves vis-à-vis this distinction.
5 According to at least some commentators (e.g. Dyson 2001: 131, 146), there is a difference between nigger and phonologically truncated nigga with the former being unambiguously insulting and the latter having been reclaimed as a term of endearment among young Blacks.
6 In both studies, native speakers of three varieties of English (American, Australian and British) rated hints second only to conventional indirectness in terms of politeness, while non-English speakers gave much more varied assessments of the im/politeness of hints.
7 This is also true of another distinction sometimes paralleled to the Politeness 1/Politeness 2 distinction, that between emic and etic, or insider and outsider perspectives on behavioral data (Haugh 2012). Having drawn this latter distinction, its proponent (Pike 1954) went on to clarify that he did not perceive a rigid dichotomy between them but rather a progression from emic to etic, such that emic units discovered via analysis of one language could be applied to analysis of another. To the extent that they are relevant to the latter, these units constitute part of an etic inventory that is no longer internal to any single language.
8 It is of course possible for a behavior to do both simultaneously: the mother’s request to look after her baby for a short while cited above limits the addressee’s freedom of action while conveying the mother’s trust in the addressee at one and the same time.
9 In fact, there is a good explanation for this from within politeness theory itself: engaging in face-threatening behavior is a risky strategy and may be an affront to the speaker’s face itself; therefore it is best avoided.

10 See www.tripadvisor.com/ShowUserReviews-g187309-d2197804-r173315580-La_Baracca_Munich-Munich_Upper_Bavaria_Bavaria.html.

11 In Terkourafi (2007) I suggest a distinction between Face 1 and Face 2, parallel to the Politeness 1: Politeness 2 distinction. According to this, Face 2 is a useful universalizing abstraction (i.e. not psychologically real to speakers) characterized by aboutness, or being directed at an Other (whence its relationality) and by being grounded in the approach–withdrawal dimension, a basic biological dimension of affiliation: disaffiliation or positive versus negative affect, which is the most basic dimension on which the range of human emotions can be built.

Further reading

References


