

THE USE OF PRAGMATIC POLITENESS THEORY IN THE INTERPRETATION OF HEMINGWAY'S "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"



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1. INTRODUCTION

The critics seem to offer contradictory accounts of the extent to which the reader may venture to give a specific interpretation of a literary text. It is often the case that a text's literal meaning seems not to suffice, and reinterpretation based on inferencing is required. However, our inferences as readers are grounded upon previously organized representations of background knowledge or "schemata" (Brown and Yule 1983: 248) which help the reader to recontextualize the behaviour represented but left unexplained in the text. Those inferences are the result of a logical need to close the open-endedness of the events alluded to in a text. The more laconic the narration—that is, the more elements not manifested on the surface of the text—the greater the interpretative effort required to fill the information gaps found there and the greater the likelihood of multifarious readings of that text.

In Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" (1935) a basic dilemma is presented, that of a couple who are considering an abortion. As readers, we are constrained in our interpretation of the story by its brevity and almost total lack of description or explanation in the text. Consequently, we have to rely on "higher-level schemata which cause us to see messages in certain ways" (Anderson et al. 1977: 377) for that sort of situation: the man,

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the adventurer, finds his freedom threatened; the woman, more sensitive, probably wants to keep the baby as a sign of their love, and so forth. Such a text engages the attention of the reader and thus requires an interpretation of the story which is bound to be highly dependent on his/her beliefs, previous experiences, moral stance, etc. The reader will also bring to the interpretation of the text his/her intertextual competence, since, as Eco suggests (1987), no text is read independently of the experience the reader has had with other texts.

Commenting on this specific story, Kundera (1994: 136) claims that readers are denied any definite clue to base their interpretation on by the writer's omission of background information and the scarcity of data we have access to through the succinct text; to use Eco's terminology, we are dealing with a "fabula aperta" (1987: 169). The reader does not know much about the characters, or about what has happened to them before, and thus he remains free to construct many different stories from the kernel situation he is presented with when reading the story. In other words, in the stylized dialogue between actual writer and reader what is unsaid weighs as much, if not more, as what is said.

As Brown and Yule (1983: 268) remark, a large part of the comprehension of what we read comes from our ability to make sense of the motivations and aims of the fictional participants. Accepting this is tantamount to saying that a text is to a greater or lesser extent open to overinterpretation (Eco 1987), that is, that a text allows for almost as many possibly divergent interpretations as readers exist.

Nevertheless, the reader is not entirely adrift; there is a relatively secure source of information in this short story which is none other than its patterning of relevant dialogue between two characters waiting for a train. We are allowed to occupy the seat next to the two strangers (the American and his lady companion) and overhear their exact words while they wait and have a drink together. I believe it is precisely on the analysis of that interaction that we can base our interpretation of the story.

In this respect, pragmatic theory has enabled researchers to probe for the uses to which speakers put language in actual communication. In addition, in theatre studies, the pragmatic approach has also recently brought about research into the nature of fictional dialogue as social interaction within a possible world. Elam (1980), Burton (1980), Herman (1995), Guillén Nieto (1998) and others operate on the assumption that dialogue in plays is a form of social interaction. Guillén Nieto (1998) testifies to the existence of a sociolinguistic and a linguistic approach to the interactive nature of dramatic dialogue. The ethnomethodologists and the Birmingham school,

representatives of the sociolinguistic approach (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1978; Coulthard 1987; Burton 1980), have concentrated on the systematic study of turn-taking, while pragmalinguistic theories have undertaken explorations of the way in which users construct meaning on the basis of the verbal code as well as other codes intersecting within language as social interaction.

More specifically I intend to use Brown and Levinson's pragmatic theory of politeness (1987) as the means of analyzing the use that the two central characters make of language when facing a conflict-ridden situation such as the one described in the story "Hills like White Elephants".

2. METHOD

Brown and Levinson (1987) postulate a Model Person endowed with the qualities of rationality and face who, being as efficient as possible, will choose the communicative strategies that will most suit his/her communicative and face needs. Furthermore, they attribute a central role to the concept of face which they define as¹ "the public self-image that everyone wants to claim for himself" (1987: 61) and which consists of two components: positive face, or the desire to be approved of and appreciated, and negative face, the desire not to be imposed upon.

Certain actions are intrinsically threatening to either kind of face; Brown and Levinson call them Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), and they include orders, requests, advice, disagreement, etc. The speaker will try to minimize the threat to face by using positive or negative politeness strategies.

Brown and Levinson's framework, unlike Leech's Politeness Principle (1983), succeeds in providing a motivation for the strategies chosen by the participants in an interaction and, as a result, their framework can be of great help in throwing light on the desires, fears and motivations of the characters and, by extension, in contributing to a less arbitrary interpretation of the narration.

In my view, the whole issue of abortion in "Hills like White Elephants" is dealt with by using well-defined politeness strategies. As Smiley (1990: 294) remarks, the American on the one hand has two major conversational objectives, viz. he wants to avoid coercing / imposing on his girlfriend while at the same time he wants her to go ahead with the FTA which the abortion represents. The girl on the other hand does not want to have the abortion but she wants to maintain camaraderie, i.e., to decrease distance. In brief, she wants to make her American man and her baby compatible.

The critics suggest that, for the American, having this baby is a great imposition, an undesirable act which means totally changing his lifestyle and giving away his freedom. For the woman, in contrast, the baby means life, motherhood and fertility; it probably also means developing a deeper bond with her partner and therefore she endeavors to preclude abortion.

It seems clear that they both have their own reasons for or against the abortion. Therefore, by asking the girl not to have the baby, the American is performing not only a very strong FTA, since this can be interpreted as lack of consideration for the girl's negative face, i.e., her freedom of choice, but also he is taking a very powerful ideological position (Fairclough 1991). Conversely, Jig, the woman, tries to preserve the baby's life on ethically and legally codified norms, even though that would bring about a radical change in their habits and severely restrict their current adventurous life. In doing this, she is also partially impinging on her partner's negative face. In brief, they both try to achieve their opposing objectives without losing face by using a variety of positive and negative politeness strategies which I will try now to detail.

Haas (1979: 290) and Tannen (1991) contend that female language tends to be relationship-oriented while male language is goal-oriented. In these terms, the strategies of the characters seem to work exactly in the expected direction. I agree with Smiley (1990: 290) that Jig's conversational objective is to establish intimacy through shared words and humor, the *joke strategy*. The girl's little witticism about the hills looking like white elephants can be explained in that light.

The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry .

"They look like white elephants", she said.

"I've never seen one", the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have".

"I might have", the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything".

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it", she said, "What does it say?"

"Anis del toro. It's a drink".

"Could we try it?" (211)

The American refuses to laugh at her innocent gag and this refusal strategically creates distance and increases his power. This is only one of the several subtle ways in which he craftily controls the interchange and also the relationship by playing with the variables in all politeness situations:

namely power and distance (Fairclough 1991). Jig, the woman, chooses to flout his dispraise and to turn it against him, but then quickly changes her tactics when he turns defensive. She grants him his desire for power by asking him about the words on the bead curtain, thus recognizing his superior knowledge and his role as an expert, an obvious positive politeness strategy.

In his study of the behavioral content areas that relate to friendship, Hays (1984: 78) includes companionship (doing things together), utility (friend as a helper), communication (disclosing information about oneself), and affection, among others. After the risk of giving the impression of lack of companionship, Jig quickly shows intimacy and friendship by addressing him as a helper and by sharing the agreeable experience of trying a new drink together.

Nonetheless she somehow finds this ritual type of intimacy unsatisfactory, inasmuch as her assertion "That's all we do [...] try new drinks" (Hemingway 1987: 212) is an attack on his positive face, for she denies common ground and creates distance. Yet the man does not seem concerned and even shows a compromising agreement on that point. The explanation of this unexpected agreement may lie in the fact that he is getting ready to bring up the abortion topic and cannot afford to disagree since that would mean increasing distance and reducing his power over her.

Following a number of irrelevant comments upon the drinks, the topic of the abortion is at last introduced by the American, who uses a combination of several strategies in order to achieve his goals.

"The beer's nice and cool", the man said.

"It's lovely", the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig", the man said. "It's not really an operation at all".

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in". (212)

It is not a mere coincidence that he is now using the girl's nickname as an endearing address form and that this is the first time we hear him use a nickname at all. In this way he manages to convey in-group membership and to reduce distance whereas not long before he was drawing away from her.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 77) define power as "the degree to which the Hearer can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of the Speaker's plans and self-evaluation". The man uses power throughout the dialogue in that double way. He purposefully denies the

importance of the abortion by repeatedly banalizing its significance to that of a very simple insignificant operation. He consequently attempts to minimize the threat, that is, to manipulate (R), the rank variable of the imposition. It is interesting to note how he always represses the word "abortion" while misdefining the operation as "natural" and misrepresenting it by referring to it metonymically as "just letting the air in" (212). Through his choice of words he imposes his own image of the abortion on her, presenting it in a way she may be able to cope with in spite of her moral scruples and in that way, I repeat, making it a less weighty imposition. His words are in fact a bending of reality exclusively to fit his needs; he is also bending language to construct (or rather reconstruct) the world to his measure and exerting power to refashion her perception of things accordingly.

Nevertheless he does offer to be with her all the time in exchange for the sacrifice of her main objective, namely, avoiding the abortion. This could be taken as an act of intimacy (sharing actions) but in the light of politeness theory it can be explained as an offer of partial compensation for the hearer's wants, while at the same time including both in the activity. His is a manipulative strategy in that it is aimed at leading her to take an unwanted decision.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural".

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before". (212)

The girl only appears to acknowledge that part of his utterance which affects her main goal, that is, that of maintaining the relationship and obtaining commitment. She is then "on record"² about wanting to know of his commitment.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy?"

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it".

"So have I", said the girl, "and afterward they were all perfectly happy".

[...]

"I think it is the best thing to do, but I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to".

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you will love me?" (213)

The man is willing to appease her with inadequate promises about what is to come but she puts an end to them by ironically echoing his questionable belief that happiness will be achieved by staying childless. At this point he shifts to a different strategy and seeks redress by avoiding coercing, a negative politeness strategy. He explicitly gives her an option not to do the act and continues to reduce the rank variable by minimizing the imposition and by impersonalizing it: "it is perfectly simple" (213); "[...] it is the best thing to do" (213); "[...] lots of people that have done it" (213).

Before giving in to having the abortion, Jig goes on record again to make sure she can at least gain one of her objectives. She asks him if he will love her afterwards and he implies that, since the baby is the cause of all their worries, everything will be fine once they get the abortion done with. But promising something you cannot possibly control or fulfill is an infelicitous act and a partly insincere one, which may allow us to conclude that he is rather more interested in getting her to go ahead with the abortion than in the possible consequences it may have for the relationship.

What comes next in their exchange is very significant. The young woman knows that she has secured one of her objectives and so she becomes deferential; she raises her partner and abases herself, thus placing him in a position to have options. Since she has chosen him over her ideals, she gives him the power of decision.

"Then I'll do it, because I don't care about me".

"What do you mean?"

"I don't care about me".

"Well I care about you".

"Oh yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine".

"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way". (213)

The man reacts in a way she did not expect. He refuses to take responsibility for the abortion and makes explicit his desire not to impinge on her. We may wonder why, once he has succeeded in making her agree with him, he detaches himself by refusing to take his share of responsibility for the act. Smiley (1990: 295) suggests that, in leaving the decision altogether to her, even though it is not hers at all, he shows that he is more concerned for his own freedom than for anything or anybody else. In my view, he becomes aware of the fact that he has damaged his positive face by forcing her to act against her will, and he tries to save his own face by showing appreciation of her goals and desires. However, in doing that, he increases the distance

between them and detaches himself from the responsibility of imposing on her.

Sensing his desire for non-involvement, Jig refuses to agree to the idea that things will work out well afterwards.

"We can have everything".

"No, we can't".

"We can have the whole world".

"No, we can't".

"We can go everywhere".

"No, we can't. It isn't ours anymore" [...] and once they take it away you never get it back". (213)

Although he is overtly giving options, she has realized that he will not be imposed upon and that his relative power is greater than her own, although not great enough to impose on her his views of the issue; all of which is proved by the fact that she again echoes him ironically in his assertion that he does not want what is not good for her and in his repeatedly expressed opinion masked as belief that the operation is perfectly simple.

3. CONCLUSIONS


With the present analysis, I hope to have borne out my contention that we can reach sound interpretative conclusions about the idiosyncrasies of the man and the girl in the story through politeness theory.

As Smiley (1990) contends, the different concept that each of the characters has of the components of intimacy and friendship may account to some extent for the miscommunication and hostilities raised throughout most of the dialogue. However, the situation of conflict they go through and the complementary linguistic strategies they follow cannot be fully accounted for by their strong gender-linked language differences. In my view, the tension results from two opposing needs: the need to do an FTA by making clear their contrary intentions, and the need to be deferential and save their own and the hearer's face by giving options and showing appreciation of the opposing party's face needs.

I hope to have shown that the use which the man makes of the strategies shows him to be at least partially insincere and scheming. With a goal-oriented objective, he skillfully manipulates all the variables of the imposition: he reduces the distance and rank of the imposition at his convenience, while at the same time he finds her deference helpful in order to

remain master of the relationship and of the conversation. It follows from my analysis that he fails to discuss sincerely with her their needs and most intimate feelings, not only because their different language is strongly gender-marked, but also because if he were sincere he would have to acknowledge how weighty indeed his imposition is on the girl.

On the other hand, it seems clear that the girl also shows dexterity in using language to her advantage by employing a variety of strategies that help her to reach her objectives. Nevertheless, in the end she is torn apart by his tactics and he appears to have succeeded in achieving his two main goals, namely to have her undergo the abortion, and to remain free from the blame of imposition.

A literary text is full of blank spaces which the reader has to fill in using inference based on his/her representations of the world and his/her intertextual competence. As Eco notes, the text is an idle mechanism which lives thanks to the additional meaning which the receiver puts into it (1987: 76). In the case of this story by Hemingway, extremely brief as it is, it may be helpful to look for formulae other than mere inferencing to arrive at a degree of univocity. In this respect, I hope to have shown that pragmatic theory, and within this, politeness theory, can offer a very useful contribution to the study of fictional dialogue as interaction in the realm of literature. It seems to me that pragmatic theory is better suited to the illumination of the intentions and strategies of the characters in the story than the broader-based but less penetrating remarks of a critic such as Smiley. 

NOTES

¹ The concept of face was originally developed by Goffman (1967). Goffman linked the concept to the folk expression "losing face", that is, being embarrassed or humiliated. He defined face as a public self-image not belonging intrinsically to the individual but on loan to him/her from society. Brown and Levinson's theory has received some criticism of the fact that they tend to see face as belonging to the individual, to the self. Similarly, several authors (Matsumoto 1988, Wierzbicka 1985, Mao 1993) have questioned the validity of their definition of the components of face, thus denying the direct applicability of the concept to many Eastern cultures.

² Brown and Levinson (1987: 69) define three sets of politeness strategies which any rational agent will employ to redress the threat inherent in certain face-threatening speech acts (FTAs). An actor can go "on record" by making

unambiguously clear to the hearer his intention when performing the act. The most direct way, going "on record", is to do the act without any redress. On the other hand, an "on record" FTA can be redressed by using a series of positive or negative strategies which show to the hearer that the speaker recognizes and tries to safeguard the hearer's positive and negative face wants. Finally, an actor goes "off record" when, his communicative intention not being completely unambiguous, he cannot be held to have committed himself to any particular intention.

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