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POLITENESS PHENOMENA IN BRITISH ENGLISH AND URUGUAYAN SPANISH: THE CASE OF REQUESTS



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INTRODUCTION

"Politeness" has been an important topic for sociology, anthropology, psychology and interrelated social sciences. However, it was not until the 70s that the concept became a major issue in pragmatics. Although linguistically scholars have not yet agreed on a definition of politeness, there appears to be a general agreement by which linguistic politeness is taken to refer to the principles, strategies and choice of linguistic forms involved in "smooth" communication, in other words, the use of verbal strategies in order to keep social interaction friction-free.

The universality of politeness principles has constituted a major concern in pragmatic research. Scholars, mainly through cross-cultural research, have sought to determine to what extent the principles of politeness vary or coincide from language to language. The aim of this article is to present an analysis and interpretation of the realisation patterns of requests in British English and Uruguayan Spanish, establishing the similarities and differences between the conceptualisation of politeness by native speakers of both languages.

BROWN AND LEVINSON'S THEORY OF POLITENESS

The issue of universality and linguistic relativity in language has always been controversial and appears to be related to earlier considerations such as the Whorfian hypothesis and its views on the relationship between language and thought. In the field of politeness, the issue of universality goes back to principles of language use such as the Gricean conversational maxims, Austin's and Searle's speech act theories and Goffman's notion of "face"; principles upon which the major theories of politeness, Lakoff's (1973), Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Leech's (1983), have been built.

The key notion in Brown and Levinson's politeness model is Goffman's (1967) notion of "face": "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself." Brown and Levinson claim that human beings have two kinds of face: positive (the desire for every individual's self-image to be appreciated and approved of) and negative (the desire of every individual to have his/her own actions unimpeded by others). The authors claim that face is vulnerable to face-threatening acts (FTAs) such as orders, requests, warnings, reminders and threats, and thus politeness strategies are used in order to reduce the imposition of FTAs. The seriousness of FTAs is assessed according to three social variables: the social distance (D) between the speaker (S) and the hearer (H), the relative power (P) of S and H and the ranking of impositions (R) within a given culture. On the basis of a permutation of these three variables, speakers determine which of the following strategies to employ:

1. Bald on record—without redressive action: saying things directly, such as "Close the window"
2. Positive politeness—expressing solidarity: "Be a nice girl and close the window"
3. Negative politeness—expressing restraint: using conventional indirectness:—"I wonder if you could close the window"
4. Off-record—using non-conventional indirectness:—"It's cold in here"
5. Don't do the FTA

The major criticisms of Brown and Levinson's theory, up to now the most comprehensive politeness model to claim the universality of politeness, are based on their neglect of discourse, their treatment of the sociological variables and on their face-saving model. Fraser and Nolen (1981) and Lavandera (1987) point to the fact that Brown and Levinson's study of politeness is based on individual sentences and structures and that

the politeness of a sentence is not determined by the sentence itself but by the context in which it takes place. Thus, a sentence like "I wonder whether you could keep quiet for a while," if analysed in isolation could be considered to be polite. However, if uttered by a speaker who is trying to watch a television programme while others are talking loudly, it may not have the same interpretation. With respect to Brown and Levinson's three sociological variables, P, D and R, not all scholars agree with their treatment of the variables and the universality of their politeness strategies, in particular the relationship between negative politeness strategies (Blum-Kulka 1987).

Brown and Levinson's claim of the universality of the concept of face has also been questioned. Matsumoto (1988) claims there is a discrepancy between the authors' assumption and the Japanese notion of face. She claims that what governs politeness in Japanese is an acknowledgement of interdependence. Gu also argues that Brown and Levinson's model is not suitable for studying politeness phenomena in Chinese since "in the Chinese context rules for politeness are moral maxims, the breach of which will incur social sanction" (1990: 240). Thus Brown and Levinson's concept of face and their distinction between positive and negative 'face' does not appear to be the same in non-western cultures where the underlying interactional focus emphasises collectivism rather than individualism. Moreover, the authors regard negative politeness as a more weighty consideration than positive politeness. Sifianou (1992) observed that the English place a higher value on negative aspects of face whereas the Greeks emphasise positive aspects of face, while Blum-Kulka (1987), Hickey (1991) and Vázquez Orta (1995) noted the same for Hebrew and Spanish, respectively. Thus it appears that Brown and Levinson's notion of face is not only not applicable to certain non-western collective cultures, but that not all cultures consider the negative aspect of face to be more important than its positive one.

THE SPEECH ACT OF REQUESTING

In Brown and Levinson's framework requests are regarded as intrinsically face-threatening activities and are therefore seen within the realm of negative politeness, since they imply an intrusion into the addressee's territory and thus limit his/her freedom of action. However, requests can also imply closeness and intimacy since the speaker must feel close enough to the addressee to ask him/her to do something (Sifianou 1992) and should thus be considered to be in the realm of positive politeness.

In Spanish and English, requests can be linguistically realised with imperatives, interrogatives, negative interrogatives and declaratives. In English direct imperatives are generally defined as appropriate constructions for commands and instructions (Lyons 1968: 307) and are consequently perceived as unacceptable for expressing requests. In Spanish, however, imperatives are not just employed for commands and instructions, they are also employed to express hopes, desires and wishes, such as ¡Mejórate pronto! (Get better soon), and they are much more frequent than in English. From the data collected by a discourse completion test based on Blum-Kulka et al's (1989) Cross Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project, as part of my MA dissertation, administered to 30 native speakers of Uruguayan Spanish (US) and 30 British English (BE) native speakers, it was seen that the use of imperatives in US is higher than that in BE, 29% and 10% respectively.

This difference could be explained in terms of morphology. While in English imperatives are uninflected and not marked for aspect or number, in Spanish they are more elaborate. They mark the distinction between singular and plural, formality and informality, the distinction between T-form and V-form. Requests and commands can also be expressed in Spanish by means of the present subjunctive or in the present indicative. The distinction in Spanish between *tú* ('you' singular), *vosotros* ('you' plural) and *usted* ('you' singular), *ustedes* ('you' plural) signals a difference in formality. *Tú* and *vosotros* are employed in situations in which there is intimacy and it expresses a feeling of 'solidarity.' *Vosotros* is also used from a position of superiority—e.g. employed by teachers to address a class. Likewise, *tú* is also employed to address someone who is perceived by the speaker as younger and/or inferior in status. *Usted* and *ustedes* are employed when addressing one or more individuals in formal situations; they are the polite form of address. It should be noted that in Uruguay, Argentina, certain regions of Chile and in Central America there is an alternative pronoun which expresses 'solidarity': *vos*,¹ which has almost replaced *tú*. Moreover, *vosotros* has totally disappeared in America. In Latin American Spanish there is no distinction between the solidarity 'you' plural, *vosotros*, and the formal 'you' plural, *ustedes*; there is only one form *ustedes* (Pedretti de Bolón 1983: 95-98). The inflected verb system in Spanish marks the distinction between *vos*, *usted* and *ustedes* in the different verb endings with the option of dropping the pronoun:

Limpia la cocina
Limpie la cocina
Limpíen la cocina

The preference in Spanish for imperative constructions can also be seen, in Brown and Levinson's terms, as an 'optimistic' way of performing FTAs since imperatives indicate a certain optimism that the addressee is willing to carry out the act requested by the speaker; thus their frequent use in Spanish can be seen as an indication of positive politeness.

Interrogatives appear to be the most prolific group for requesting in both languages. However, they are more common in BE than in US, 86% and 68%, respectively. In English there is a stronger preference for more elaborate constructions with modals, which express detachment, whereas in Spanish requests are generally realised with the present indicative, which expresses certainty and involvement:

1. ¿Me das plata para el boleto?
2. ¿Me darías plata para el boleto?

The first example when translated literally into English may either sound like a request for information: *Are you giving me money for the fare?* and thus lose its requestive force, or it may even sound ironic, depending on the context. To convey the same requestive force in English we have to resort to modals: *Can you give me money for the fare?* and *Could you give money for the fare?* The second example makes use of the conditional; it denotes improbability and hence it equates with a higher degree of linguistic politeness.

The use of modals, as previously mentioned, denotes tentativeness and lack of commitment. It could be argued that the frequent use of modals in English provides its speakers with a detachment device which enables them to distance themselves from the requestive act by means of the form's inherent pragmatic ambiguity. In Spanish, however, most interrogative requests are realised with the present indicative denoting certainty and reality. The present tense form of the indicative is used in Spanish as a familiar, rather than 'curt' imperative (Butt and Benjamin 1989: 197). Within present indicative constructions in Uruguayan Spanish, interrogative-negative constructions are frequently used as polite requests. According to Brown and Levinson (1978: 179) negative-interrogatives encode polite pessimism. The same could be said about conditional constructions. By using the negative and the conditional the speaker makes it easier for the addressee to refuse and thus there is less risk of loss of face. However, the majority of requests collected by the discourse completion test were realised in the present indicative, thus predicting or counting on the addressee's performing the act:

3. ¿Me prestas los apuntes de la clase pasada?
4. ¿Me das los apuntes de la clase pasada?

5. ¿No me prestas los apuntes?
6. ¿No me arrimas hasta casa?

It should be noted, however, that present indicative constructions can be used as requests in English only when they are negatively phrased and followed by a question tag or when they are indirect:

7. You haven't got a pen, have you?
8. Are you making tea?

The above differences could be explained by the fact that in Spanish everyday tasks are regarded as less imposing on the addressee and thus can be requested with more direct constructions, especially amongst equals. Interrogative request forms in Spanish point to a more positive politeness society whereas those in English point to a more negative politeness society in which social norms make directness inappropriate.

Requests can also be realised in both languages by declaratives. In English 'I'd like' is one of the most widely used conventionalised ways of stating a request. Although declaratives would make the request more direct than interrogatives, the inclusion of the modal would once again enhances the unreal and hypothetical, expressing detachment. In Spanish, however, the verbs 'querer' and 'necesitar' are usually employed in requests of this type without any modals; thus requests of this type, when translated into English, might sound too direct and thus impolite to English speakers:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 9. Quiero que limpies la cocina | I want you to clean the kitchen |
| 10. Necesito que me prestes
plata para pagar la cuenta | I need you to lend me money to
pay the bill |

Within this group requests can also be realised by the use of hints, non-conventional indirectness, or to use Brown and Levinson's terminology, off-record strategies, such as "It's cold in here," intended by the speaker as a request for the addressee to shut the window. According to Brown and Levinson this strategy is used when the speaker wants to minimise the degree of imposition. The use of this particular strategy had very low incidence in both languages, 3.4% in BE and 3.3% in US. Interestingly enough, BE speakers employed this strategy in situations in which the interlocutors were not familiar with each other. On the other hand, US speakers employed the strategy only in those situations in which the interlocutors were friends. It could thus be assumed that the rationale of the off-record strategies is to

provide the addressee with the opportunity to volunteer. In other words, the speaker is leaving the options open to the addressee either because s/he does not want to impose on the addressee, or because the speaker wants to give the addressee the opportunity to offer and thereby indicates consideration for the speaker's needs. Thus it could be said that the use of hints in US is linked to positive politeness whereas the use of the same strategy in BE appears to be linked to negative politeness. Further research is needed in order to substantiate this point.

CONCLUSIONS

The major difference between US and BE requests is a matter of orientation. Uruguayans appear to be more inclined towards positive politeness when requesting as opposed to the British, who seem to be more inclined towards negative politeness. This difference can be traced to the notion of face. The British appear to attach more significance to the negative aspects of face, such as non-imposition and detachment, whereas the Uruguayans seem to attach more importance to the positive aspects of face, such as approval and involvement. Furthermore, as Hickey and Vázquez Orta (1996) point out for Spaniards, Uruguayans not only have an individual desire to be liked and approved of, but they also have a desire for those closely related to be liked and approved of.

Using Hall's (1976) distinction, one could say that the main difference between requests in BE and US is due to the fact that Uruguayans are a high-context culture, a culture in which "stored information" is more stable, hence the directness levels utilised and the involvement. It is a culture in which the expression of feelings is emphasised. The British, on the other hand, have a low-context culture, a culture in which "stored information" is less stable. The level of indirectness employed denote detachment in a culture where the symbolic medium is emphasised. According to Hall, "people raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems" (1976: 98). Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988: 91) claim that

members of low- and high-context systems negotiate negative-'face' and positive-'face', with members of low-context systems focusing on negative-'face' maintenance process and members of high-context systems focusing on positive-'face' maintenance process...

To conclude, both negative and positive politeness exists in Uruguayan Spanish and British English requests. In terms of the speech act of requesting, Uruguayans, when compared to the British, seem to show a preference for linguistic expressions which emphasise positive politeness aspects, whereas the British appear to prefer linguistic expressions which emphasise negative politeness aspects. ❧

NOTE

1. In Montevideo, in particular, it is almost impossible to find speakers who do not employ vos (Behares 1981:36).

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