

Politeness Principle in Business Correspondence and Language Teaching

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Abstract

One of the indispensable contributors for effective communication is politeness. It works as the lubricant to reduce frictions especially in business conversations. Politeness is also a compulsory lesson for language learners to take since it can bridge people from diverse backgrounds together. This essay firstly makes a brief review of the significant development of Politeness Theory. By shedding the light on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the essay discusses its applicability in western context and eastern context since the understanding of face needs can be different for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The essay then relates politeness to business correspondence to emphasize its importance for language learners. Based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, an analysis of Chinese and native speaker's writing style has been presented as an example. The importance of teaching politeness, one of the speech acts, to language learners is discussed in the end. It is suggested that language teachers should not only introduce politeness principles but also hold various kinds of awareness-raising activities for learners to be immersed in specific contexts.

Keywords: Politeness Principle, Business Communication, Language Teaching, Pragmatics, Face Theory

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Introduction

Politeness is a compulsory lesson for language learners to take since it can bridge people from diverse backgrounds together. In the following parts, the essay firstly makes a brief review of the significant development of Politeness Theory and then discusses its applicability in western context and eastern context. Followed by an analysis of Chinese and native speaker's writing style, this essay proposes suggestions for future teaching of politeness.

Definition of Politeness

The flourishing development of politeness theory has created miscellaneous definitions of politeness. Lakoff (1975: p. 64) defines it as the way to “reduce friction in personal communication”. Soon after, Leech (1983: p. 64) proposed that being polite is to avoid conflict strategically and politeness “can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a conflict situation”. Brown and Levinson (1987: p.1) then made the face theory prevailing by suggesting that politeness is “a complex system for softening face threats”. Except for all these mentioned above, other researchers have developed their own versions of politeness such as Ide (1989), Kasper (1990) and Eelen (2001). In general, it is believed that to be polite means a person need to stay kind, friendly, respectful, considerate and tolerant. Although there exists various viewpoints of politeness, they all share the consensus that politeness as a type of speech acts, is an important part of pragmatics to avoid conversational conflicts and thus promote smooth communication.

Review of Politeness Theory

One of the most remarkable theories related to politeness is developed by Brown and Levinson in 1987. In 1967, Goffman introduced the concept of ‘face’ which is described as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (p. 213). Brown and Levinson then borrow from this notion and present their understanding of ‘face’ as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” and things which are emotionally invested, and “can be lost, maintained, or enhanced”, and must be invariably kept in mind when interacting with others (1987: p. 61). They comp up with the concept of ‘model person’ which is a competent adult who is inclined to preserve his face (Jansen & Janssen, 2010: p. 2533). Brown and Levinson assume that the face of a person will be threatened as long as he is involved in communication.

When speech acts are performing in the face-threatening way, two types of linguistic actions to convey politeness will be shown: positive politeness and negative politeness. In terms of Curtone (2011), positive politeness motivates the sense of membership among interlocutors. Interlocutors who expect to be favored by others tend to take positive politeness strategies to show intimacy and solidarity. Negative politeness which stands for non-encroachment and social distance can be found in speakers who would like to preserve independence (Flowerdew, 2013).

Brown and Levinson suggest fifteen positive politeness strategies (as cited in Flowerdew, 2013: p.108):

1. Notice, attend to H (hearer)
2. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)

3. Intensify interest to H
4. Use in-group identify markers
5. Seek agreement
6. Avoid disagreement
7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
8. Joke
9. Assert or presuppose S's (speaker's) knowledge of and concern for H's wants
10. Offer, promise
11. Be optimistic
12. Include both S and H in the activity
13. Give (or ask for) reasons
14. Assume or assert reciprocity
15. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)

Controversies on Politeness Model

Although the politeness model of Brown and Levinson has provided strategies for interlocutors to mitigate the force of face-threatening (Al-Hindawi, 2016), it still receives considerable criticism from other researchers. Brown and Levinson hold the view that their politeness model is universal in language use and applies to cultures outside of the domain of Anglo-Saxon (Flowerdew, 2013). Every person involved in a conversation is an independent individual seeking for individual rights (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this light, the explanations of face needs tend to be individualistic which represents the individualism in the western culture. However, different cultural backgrounds produce distinct politeness (Chang, 2008). When communicating with people from diverse backgrounds, it is of great significance to take the culture behind into account to avoid cultural conflicts and discomforts. Researchers like Fukada and Asato (2004: p. 1992) therefore questioned about the universal applicability of this politeness model since the space for variation among other cultures is absent. For instance, 'face' in eastern culture is explained as "the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation" (Cheng, 2012). Collectivism, which is contrary to individualism, is the symbol of eastern culture. Eastern people get used to connect themselves to the family, the social circle and the working sites, chasing for the feeling of being accepted by the main stream. The emphasis in eastern interactions is to keep up the harmony by affirming and ratifying the existing relationship (O'keeffe, Clancy & Adolphs, 2011). Those appropriate speech acts to keep face in western world may be seen as improper, selfish or eccentric in eastern culture. And vice versa. In this vein, the cultural conflicts between the west and the east bring the claim of wide universality of this politeness model in question. Also, the conflicts demonstrate that the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) may not be a panacea in communication occurring in contexts other than English.

The significance of the politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson in English speaking countries is undoubted. It is widely utilized in studies of comparing intercultural differences from the aspect of the perceptions of politeness in speech acts (e.g. House & Kasper, 1981; Blum-Kulka, Shoshanna, Juliane, Gabriele, House & Kasper, 1989). However, although the neglect of cultural characteristics in eastern world has brought questions to its applicability, this politeness model has been employed by a number of Asian researchers in studies related to politeness speech acts in China (e.g. Hong, 1998; Zhang, 2016; Zhou, 2017; Cang, 2019). Surprisingly, there is no discussion in these researches about whether this model is suitable for studying Chinese culture. It seems that researchers consider the use of this theory as default in the field of studying politeness phenomena. It is advised that future

studies can shed light on the reason why researchers take this model as default for politeness analysis, discuss further about its applicability for studying politeness in China, and hopefully develop a new politeness model specializing in Chinese culture.

Politeness in Business Correspondence

Even though the applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness model in speech acts studies in eastern cultures is questionable in general, taking this model as the analysis method in cross-cultural business correspondence, especially in Chinese and English business emails, is of great significance.

Cross-border business has become the mainstream with the trend of globalization. Since novel technologies have broken the borders, sellers and buyers from all over the world contact each other through business emails. As Mayher (1983: p.1) suggested, writing is the "language choice on paper". For cross-cultural business, the use of proper expressions among various online negotiations is one of the determinants of success. Besides, the use of polite language presents the respectfulness to the culture behind the communicators. Inappropriate use of linguistic knowledge may cause pragmatic failure in the interactions among interlocutors from different cultures. The communication may be seen as impolite or status-incongruent and speakers may be judged unfavorably for their personality (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). Therefore, gaining the knowledge of ways of showing politeness in a certain culture is of great importance in helping establish a friendly relationship and smooth the communication to achieve interests for business.

Since a great number of transactions are conducted between China and other English-speaking countries, Brown and Levinson's politeness model, as an analysis model, provides Chinese email writers with the principles and forms of appropriate language in Anglo-Saxon culture. Also, there are many researches related to the comparison of politeness in Chinese and English business email writing (e.g. Zhang, 2016; Zhou, 2017; Cang, 2019). All these contribute for achieving smooth interactions between the two distinct cultures by putting feet in each other's shoes.

In the following paragraphs, two English emails for establishing business relations will be compared and analyzed in terms of the positive politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson.

Figure 1: The positive politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson.

Dear Miny,

Our company has been the leading importer of Motorcycles for many years. At present, we are interested in extending our range and would appreciate your catalogues and quotations.

If your prices are competitive we would like to place a trial order with you. For your information our market is steady demand, it can provide you with information about our business.

We will appreciate it if you can establish business relation with us.

We look forward to your early reply.

Yours faithfully,

Jojo

(Cited from Zhou, 2017)

This is a reply to the email about establishing business relations from an exporter. Overall, it is loosely organized and presents politeness in Chinese way. First of all, the writer does not state the purpose of writing this email at the beginning. Instead, he explains the intention of building up relations at the end of the email. This is the representation of ways of showing politeness in China. Chinese tend to hide the true desire until the end of a conversation since reserve is a distinctive feature in eastern culture. But in western world, people starts with describing the aim in email writing. The discrepancy of perceiving politeness can bring annoyance and discomfort to the receiver. In addition, the tone of this email is superior. It includes few signs of showing positive politeness. The compliments made in the email center around the writer. Also, the second paragraph solely expressed the writer's desirable benefits, like the competitive price. The possible benefits of the reader is neglected. There is no signs of presupposing the concern for the other's wants. Besides, the strategies of raising common ground and assuming reciprocity are absent. Since the purpose of this email is to seek for cooperation, the use of these two strategies are considered to be helpful for arousing interests for further interactions and facilitating the communication smoothly. Therefore, this email fails to promote effective interaction.

Figure 2: The email fails to promote effective interaction.

Dear Miny,

①We acknowledge with thanks the receipt your email of May 6th, and take the pleasure of establishing business relations with your corporation.

②Your motorcycle products are so attractive that we are confident of securing large orders for you to satisfy the steady increasing need of our market. We shall be obliged if you could send us catalogues and quotations.

③We look forward to your early reply.

Yours faithfully,

Jojo

(Cited from Zhou, 2017)

The second email is unfolded in a clear structure and uses a number of positive politeness strategies. Different from the first one, it starts with claiming the purpose of writing by using a bit exaggerating expressions of approval to the reader, such as “acknowledge with thanks” and “take the pleasure of”, which at the same time presents the attitude of optimism. The second paragraph then connects the writer and the reader together and considers the benefit wants of the reader. Also, in order to redress the possible face threat on the reader, the write expresses the inquiry for catalogues and quotations in a modest way. By employing positive politeness strategies, this email has demonstrated the determination of establishing the friendly business relations and respect for each other, which may lay a solid foundation for future communication (Zhou, 2017).

Application to Teaching

When referring to the question of teachability of second language pragmatic competence including politeness, researchers held miscellaneous views. Kasper (1997) presented a negative answer in her early papers claiming that language learners have possessed pragmatic knowledge in their first language. And the knowledge of L1 will be transferred naturally to the study of L2. Nevertheless, the influence of L1 transfer on the L2 may not be invariably positive because of the intervention of intercultural discrepancies and inapplicability. In this sense, pedagogic intervention is essential. Besides, as studies (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Bouton, 1988; Kasper, 1995; Rose & Kasper, 2001) show, it is difficult for learners to acquire pragmatic knowledge by themselves for most of the time. Therefore, the instructions from language teachers and opportunities for practicing and developing pragmatic competence are indispensable.

The teaching of politeness is omnipresent in English classrooms in China. Intercultural communicative competence is an integral part of cultivating goals of National Curriculum Standard for English. Paying attention to the similarities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures (Ministry of Education, 2020) has been emphasized in every stage of language learning. And for students majoring in business English, gaining pragmatic knowledge of politeness is a compulsory course since email is the main tool for cross-cultural communication. Things need to be followed includes “pragmatic competence, awareness of the politeness conventions and email etiquette” (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015: p. 415).

Although college students are capable of producing appropriate linguistic forms and structures of a business email, the challenge of presenting the proper level of politeness exists (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015), which means explicit instructions and practical experiences are needed.

The teaching should include not only the introduction of politeness principles but also various kinds of awareness-raising activities. It is advised for teachers to select email texts that shows different politeness norms and then ask students to identify similarities and differences. Also, role play in the course for introducing cultural differences can be beneficial. Students in the class can act as people from different countries to hold business negotiation meeting. This can help students become aware of the demonstration form of politeness that prevail in different cultures. Also, it helps students to find out the inconsistency of pragmatic knowledge between the L1 and the target language. Other than consciousness-raising activities, exercises in specific context is required. Since business correspondence contains lots of themes such as claim letter, order letter and complaint letter, teachers can devise specific contexts and provide corpus of politeness in business for students to refer to and get familiar with different expressions in different genres so that they can put what they have acquired in the class into practice.

Conclusion

Politeness is an indispensable contributors for effective communication, especially in interactions take place in business area and also a compulsory lesson for language learners to take. Without bearing intercultural characteristics in mind to avoid offense, the speech full of flourish is of no use to tightly bridge people from various backgrounds together.

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