

The Effect of Addressee's Social Power on the Speaker's Choice and Frequency of Politeness Strategies: A Sociopragmatic Study

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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to investigate the potential effect of addressee's power on the choice and frequency of politeness strategies in the realization of requestive speech act. To achieve this, a total number of ten situations were provided, in each of which a requestive speech act was addressed to the addressee who was either more powerful or less powerful than the addressor. The addressor's replies were collected through a modified version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Then our data were analyzed in lines with Brown and Levinson's framework (1987), and a chi-square test was used to test our null hypothesis as well. The computation of chi-square revealed a significant effect of power on the choice and frequency of politeness strategies employed by the subjects. It was also found that native-Persian speakers tend to be more negatively polite in their realization of requestive speech acts.

KEYWORDS: social power, politeness strategies, requestive speech act, null hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness rules – as aspects of language use- have been the subject of a great many studies and pertaining their degree of universality different claims have been made by different scholars such as Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1987) etc. Furthermore, Politeness norms – as the presentation of language use – are considered as properties of pragmatic competence. So their specification will further our understanding of pragmatic dimensions of communicative system and ultimately our understanding of communicative competence.

It is important to recognize that the individual who wishes to learn a new language, must, in addition to acquiring a new vocabulary and a new set of phonological and syntactic rules, learn what Hymes (1972) calls the rules of speaking - the patterns of appropriate sociolinguistic behavior of the target language. Applied linguistics as a discipline has broadened in the recent years as scholars in the field have increasingly recognized the need to include the insights and perspectives of general linguistics and related fields. Pattern of polite interaction has specific bearing to the field of applied linguistics on the ground that the understanding and knowledge of appropriate speech behavior is crucial if learners are to communicate effectively with native speakers of the language they are learning. Likewise, as Widdowson (1978) argues, language learners are just as liable to transfer rules of use as those of usage. In other words, it is reasonable to argue in favor of pragmatic transfer of appropriate sociolinguistic patterns of interaction. In this line, findings of this study can serve as a foundation for the future study of transfer of L1 pragmatics into L2. As the study of language has evolved from the narrow confines of language form to include the study of language use, researchers have often found themselves either without the theoretical models needed to propose and discuss the issues or without a researcher methodology adequate to collect appropriate data (Feasler and Nolon, 1979). The study of politeness phenomenon and how it is associated with linguistic structures seem to suffer from both. However an adequate theory of language and a research methodology sufficient to collect appropriate data serve as a foundation on which to conduct language study.

1. Theoretical perspectives and framework

One of the most influential models which have gained support from many perspectives is 'Communicative Competence' of Hymes (1978). He coined the term from communicative competence in reaction to Chomsky's notion of linguistic competence. In his basic linguistic model, Chomsky (1965) defines competence as the underlying knowledge of grammatical system. Hymes views it too restrictive in that it excludes the social aspects of language. Consequently, he defines communicative competence as that aspect of competence that enables language users to convey and interpret within a specific context. It includes not only grammatical competence but also knowledge of appropriateness and acceptability. Later, scholars such as Swain (1980) and Bachman (1987), among others, have developed seminal work on defining 'Communicative Competence'. Bachman (1987), describes it in a way that is consonant with earlier work on 'Communicative Competence' in

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the sense that the ability to use language communicatively consists of knowledge of the language on one hand and the capacity for implementing or using this competence on the other hand. Bachman specifies that language competence consists of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Following Vandijke (1980), Bachman (1987), maintains that pragmatics consists of conventional rules of language and their realization in the production and comprehension of utterances. Within linguistic pragmatics, Grice (1978), has attempted to formulate the pragmatic rules of language. Consequently, he proposed Cooperative Principle. Amongst the pragmatic rules of language, politeness norms are of high interest and have been seen as a complement to the Gricean maxims.

Politeness phenomenon has been the subject of a great many studies and has been tackled differently by different scholars. Lackoff (1973) has adopted a rule-based approach to politeness. She sees politeness as the verbal realization of proper social behavior which is developed by societies to facilitate interaction among people. Following Lackoff, Fraser (1981) takes a more sociolinguistic approach to politeness phenomenon. By employing the notion of ' Conversational Contract – the understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine the limits of interaction, he defines politeness as a distance-making strategy. Leech (1983) has also taken a normative approach; he views politeness principle of his own as a complement to the cooperative principle of Grice and states that people are polite with respect to some norms of behavior which are typical to their community.

The most influential theory of politeness was put forward by Brown and Levinson (1978 and revised in 1987). They have treated politeness in a different way from other scholars. Central to their theory is the concept of ' Face ' as proposed by Goffman. Within this theory, face is best understood as very individual feeling of self-worth or self-image; this image can be damaged, maintained or enhanced through interaction with others. Face has two aspects – positive and negative. An individual's positive face is reflected in his or her desire to be liked, approached of, respected and appreciated by others. And an individual's negative face is reflected in the desire not to be impeded, put upon, or to have the freedom as he chooses.

According to Brown and Levinson, there are certain kinds of acts that intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts whose very nature run contrary to the face want of addressee or of speaker. In the context of mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat.

And finally, Yarmohammadi (1995) developed a sociopragmatic approach to analyze politeness forms. He takes the position that pragmatic descriptions ultimately have to be related to specific social settings and claims that pragmatic analytic tools such as ' Grice's Cooperative Principle ' (1975), ' Lackoff's Rules of politeness ' (1973), ' Austin speech act theory ' (1962) or ' Leech's politeness maxims ' (1983) all operate variably in different social settings.

Forming a theory of universals of language use, ie., specifying which aspects of language use are universal and which aspects are culture-specific- has always been the far-reaching aim of inquiries in linguistics and in the related areas. Rules of politeness – as an aspect of language use – have been the subject of several studies and pertaining their degree of universality different claims have been made by different scholars. Lackoff (1973) states that her rules of politeness are universal. Brown and Levinson (1987) also claim that central to their model is a highly abstract notion of face which consists of two specific kinds of desires attributed by interactions to each other. This is the bare bones of a notion of face which, they claim, is universal. On the other hand, the notion of face is naturally linked to some of the most fundamental cultural ideas about the nature of social persona, honor and virtue, shame and redemption, and thus to religious concepts. So it varies across languages and cultures and drawing conclusion concerning the degree of universality and specificity of politeness norms require a great deal of researches and data cross-culturally.

Furthermore, Widdowson (1978) writes that language learners are just as liable to transfer rules of use as those of usage. James (1980) also argues in favor of the transfer of L1 communicative competence into L2. In this line, the results of the present study as focused on pragmatic rules of politeness – could provide information for further study of pragmatic transfer of Persian rules of politeness into L2.

In Brown and Levinson's terminology (1987), two concepts are put forward which are realized as positive and negative politeness. Positive politeness utterances are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy to imply common ground of sharing of wants to a limited extent even between strangers who perceive themselves as somehow similar. For the same reason, positive politeness strategies are utilized both for FTA redress and as a kind of social accelerator to indicate that S (Speaker source) wants to come closer to H (Hearer) source. Negative politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), is interpreted as redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face, ie., his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. In other words, negative politeness is oriented mainly toward satisfying H's negative face want; his basic want to claim for territory and self-determination. It is the heart of respect behavior; just as positive politeness is the kernel of familiar and joking behavior. Considering Fraser's framework of politeness (1990), it is (Politeness) is viewed as a conversational contract. He argues that people are constrained in interaction by what he calls a conversational contract – understanding which people bring to an interaction of

the norms obtaining within that interaction and of their rights and obligations within it. He takes a more sociolinguistic approach than Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1983) do.

Leech (1980) conceives of politeness as crucial in explaining why people are so often indirect in conveying what they mean and as rescuing the cooperative principle in the sense that politeness can satisfactorily explain exceptions to and apparent deviations from the cooperative principle. In his principle of pragmatics, Leech introduces the politeness principle with its six maxims. He defined it as “minimize the expression of impolite belief; maximize the expression of polite beliefs.” A number of scholars such as Thomas (1986), Brown and Levinson (1987) and Fraser (1990) express their objections to Leech's approach to politeness in that it seems to be no motivated way of restricting the number of maxims.

Three sociological factors are crucial in determining the level of politeness which a speaker will use to an addressee. They are termed as 'relative power (P) of H (Hearer) over the social distance (D) between S and H and ranking of imposition (R) involved in doing the face threatening act. Preston (1989) defines power as asymmetric social relations, including older than, parent of, employee of, and nobler than. Spence-Oatey (1992) also discusses different types of power at some length. They are legitimate, Reference, Expert, Coercive power. Brown and Levinson maintain that Power is an asymmetric social dimension of relative power; it is the degree to which H can impose his or her own plans and self-evaluation at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation. They further argue that there are two sources of power either of which may be authorized or unauthorized – material control (over the action or the actions of others by virtue of economic distribution and physical force) and (metaphysical control by virtue of metaphysical forces subscribed to by others. There is also experimental support in the compliance-gaining literature for the importance of the P (power) and R (ranking of imposition) variables in determining politeness assessments; for example, from Holtgraves (1984) , Baxter (1984) for the P variables and from Mclaughlin (1981) for the importance of R.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The variable under the present study is addressee's social power. To examine the potential effect of this factor on the choice and frequency of politeness strategies used by native-Persian speaker in requestive speech act situations where the addressee was either more powerful or less powerful than addressor, the following null hypotheses were proposed:

- a. Addressee's social power has no effect on the addressor's choice of politeness strategies in the realization of requestive speech act.
- b. Addressee's social power exerts no influence on the frequency of politeness strategies employed in the realization of requestive speech act.

Sixty native-Persian speakers participated in the investigation. They were university students studying English major. Thirty males and thirty females represented the subjects. Their ages ranged from 18 to 31. The mean age for the females was 22 and for the males 25.

The data in the study were gathered through administration of an open-ended written questionnaire – a modified version of Discourse Completion Test, abbreviated as DEC (Eslami-Rasekh, 1992). Since we chose to study the variable Power (p), our DEC was designed in such a way that extraneous variable had low values. In another sense, D and R are kept constant by our Dec through request for free goods and through asking from the addressee who was not stranger.

Our DEC also included total number of ten situations in each of which the speaker requested something from the hearer who was either more powerful or less powerful than the speaker. Since power is asymmetric and the other five to more powerful addressee.

3. Data Analysis

Responses collected through our open-ended questionnaire were classified in lines with the types of politeness strategies employed by the subjects with responses to P variable. The basis of our classification was the framework proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). To test our null hypothesis, we used a chi-square test.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Politeness strategies used in less powerful situations

Analysis of data collected through our written questionnaire showed that native- Persian speakers use five politeness strategies to perform requestive speech act in a position of low power. They included: Apology, Be conventionally indirect, Give reason, Deference and Question and hedges. In these situations, no strategy was applied alone, ie. , usually a mixture of two or three strategies was employed to perform a request. In most cases, is begun with apology, then providing reason and background for the request, and finally the request was performed either directly or indirectly with hedges. As illustrated in the following table, Question and Hedges was the most frequent strategy. Out of 831, 273 strategies included this one.

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of politeness strategies used in less powerful situations

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Be conventionally indirect	124	14.42%
Apology	221	26.59%
Question and Hedges	173	26.59% 2.85%
Give Reason	157	18.89%
Deference	56	6.38%
Total	561	100%

5.2. Politeness strategies used in more powerful situations

Classification of strategies used in the realization of 300 requestive speech acts revealed that native- Persian speakers use two kinds of strategies to make requests in a position of high power. The first and the most frequent strategy used in the present study was imperative. It was usually employed alone. Imperative, with respect to Brown and Levinson's framework, goes under bald on record strategy. The second type of strategy was the negative politeness strategy of Question and Hedges.

Table 2. The frequency and percentage of the strategies used in more powerful situations

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Imperative	247	75.76%
Question and Hedges	79	24.23%
Total	326	100%

5.3. Effect of power in terms of frequency of occurrence

As illustrated in tables 1 and 2, the frequency of politeness strategies also differed in the two specified situations. In other words, the number of the strategies being employed in less powerful situations outran the number of the strategies being used in more powerful situations. The frequency of the strategies in the former ran as high as 831, while in the latter, the number of the strategies totaled as 326.

5.4. Effect of power on the choice and frequency of politeness strategies

It was hypothesized that the variable of power has no effect on the choice and frequency of politeness strategies used by the addressor in the realization of requestive speech act. In order to test the potential effect of this variable on the speakers' choice of politeness strategies, and in terms of their frequency of occurrences, we used a chi-square test. As illustrated in the following table, computation of chi-square revealed a significant deference, in terms of type and frequency of strategies employed in the positions where power had either high or low value. The critical value of χ^2 with 5 degree of freedom was 15.08 for the level of 0 .01 and 11.07 for the level of 0 .05. So we can feel fairly confident that our data reject our claims that the addressee's power has no effect on the speaker's choice of politeness strategies and on the frequency of their occurrences.

Table3. The choice and frequency of politeness strategies resulting from power

Strategy	Power		Total
	High	Low	
Imperative	247	0	247
Question/Hedges	79	273	352
Apology	0	221	221
Reason	0	157	157
Deference	0	56	56
Be conventionally indirect	0	124	124
Total	326	831	1157

Chi-square
526

critical value
15.08 / 11.07

5. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The analysis of the data in all the ten situations revealed that native-Persian speakers select six types of strategies from three different classes of negative politeness, bald on record and positive politeness. Based upon the estimation of addressee's state of power, the subjects have employed special types of strategies from three different super-strategies of negative politeness, bald on record and positive politeness from more to less in

terms of frequency, respectively. Given all of the strategies, 75 percent of strategies were negative politeness types, 21 percent bald on record, and finally, 4 percent positive politeness strategies. As the computation of the frequency of the politeness strategies revealed, the number of the negative politeness strategies ran higher than the frequency of other types. So it can be said that native-Persian speakers, by the estimate of addressee's power, tend to be more negatively polite.

The dichotomy of addressees' state of power has also played a significant role in this study. The subjects in the positions of low power have not adopted a direct means to end mechanism. To put it differently, instead of directly jumping to the end, the subjects have gone through several softening devices. They have selected a mixture of two or more strategies because of face considerations. The most remarkable mitigating device and also the most frequent one which was used at the outset of performing a requestive speech act was that of apology. Linguistically, the length of the requestive speech acts performed by more powerful speakers was also shorter than the length of the requestive speech acts performed by less powerful addressors. It might be so because of baldness or no concern for face.

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