



Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory Revisited: Rejection or Acceptance?

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, I have briefly revisited Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal theory which has attracted the attention of many linguists to the notion of politeness as an essential feature of communication. Although in studies on politeness Brown and Levinson's model is more or less considered the standard model, it seems that there is not an agreed upon consensus that the complex concept of politeness can be simply captured through this linear and static model. In addition, there is a paucity of investigations into the applicability of this model in various cultures. Therefore, I analyzed and identified the strategies found in Iranian English speakers' requests and apologies following this theory. To this end, adopting a qualitative research approach, data was collected through a multiple-choice discourse completion test and think aloud protocols. The results of the study revealed that Brown and Levinson's model can account, to a large extent, for people's choice of politeness strategies in making both requests and apologies. In particular, the findings pointed to the ubiquitous presence of three influential factors in the degree of politeness; that is, power relations, social distance and rank of imposition in the participants' choice of politeness strategies. However, the findings of the study indicated that there are a few shortcomings associated with Brown and Levinson's model. The study suggests that the weight of politeness cannot be simply measured based on a linear, static basis. The findings supported that for the individuals who participated in this study, politeness was a heavily context-bound and highly dynamic concept. On this basis, I hypothesize that a systematic model of politeness can better explain the variations of individuals' choice of politeness strategies.

KEYWORDS: Brown and Levinson's politeness model; Politeness models; Request strategies; Apology strategies; Iranian English speakers

1. Introduction

Politeness is an essential feature of communication, and it basically represents a speaker's social concerns about how to interact with others appropriately according to their personal status and social norms (Brown, 2001). People employ various politeness strategies to enhance the possibility of getting their messages across without damaging their social relationships with their interlocutors (Eshghinejad & Moini, 2016). The concept of politeness has been extensively investigated in different contexts for a number of good reasons and, consequently, various theories have been put forward to capture the complexity of politeness (e.g., Cruse, 2000; Ellen, 2001; Fraser, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). One central theory that has attracted many linguists' attention is Brown and Levinson's universal theory of politeness (1987).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), in studies of politeness, two concepts play an important role: the concept of face and politeness strategies. In their formulation of politeness theory, face is defined as a "self-image" that involves

people's emotions. In any normal communicative situation, attempts are made to maintain "self-image." This is often done through recognizing the desires of the interlocutor and understanding their wants. Failure to appreciate such wants and desires results in "self-image" to be lost. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory further explains which speech acts can threaten and/or protect face. It is also claimed to be capable of providing detailed explanations about when people are expected to protect face, and when they are more vulnerable to face threatening acts.

Brown and Levinson distinguish negative face from positive face. While negative face is considered to be the desire not to be imposed upon, positive face is believed to be the desire to have the approval or agreement of others. Moreover, they speculate that the distinction between positive and negative face is a universal phenomenon, but it can be the subject of cultural elaboration in any speech community (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this regard, Mir-Fernandez (1994) maintains that the concept of face involves personal decisions about social values and norms for effective communication. On this basis, face is a reflection of cultural norms and can vary from context to context.

Based on Brown and Levinson, there are three important situational variables that influence people's choice of politeness level: the social distance between speaker and hearer, the relative power of speaker and hearer, and the absolute ranking of impositions within a particular culture. Thus, in their tripartite model, the weight of any face threatening speech act can be simply calculated as the sum of these variables (Vinagre, 2008).

Although in studies on politeness Brown and Levinson's model is more or less considered the standard model, it seems that there is not an agreed upon consensus that the complex concept of politeness can be simply captured through this linear and static model. In addition, there is a paucity of investigations into the applicability of this model in various cultures. Thus, this paper intends to apply Brown and Levinson's model for the analysis of politeness strategies employed by Iranian English speakers. In doing so, I follow Brown and Levinson's (1987) tripartite model of politeness variables in order to analyze and identify the strategies found in Iranian English speakers' requests and apologies.

2. Review of literature

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has been subject to empirical investigations, and consequently various criticisms have been leveled against this theory. The first strand of criticism concerns the model's failure to account for cross-cultural variations. Despite the fact that Brown and Levinson claimed their theory is a universal model of politeness, many researchers have cast doubts on the universality of this theory. Central to arguments against Brown and Levinson's model is the claim that it only reflects the norms of highly individualistic societies (Wierzbicka, 1991). For instance, studies on the conception of face, conducted in Asian contexts such as China, resulted in significantly different results (Mao, 1994). In addition, Mao (1994) and Matsumoto (1988) found out that in the Japanese culture the distinction between positive and negative face with equal weight does not hold. Moreover, they reported that in the East the social self is more highly valued than the individual self.

In a different study, Leech (2007) discussed the limitations of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. He proposed a super constraint for the study of politeness known as "grand strategy of politeness." Leech (2007) argued that in order to be polite, speakers (especially in more socially stratified contexts) may express or imply meanings that associate a high value to the hearers or meanings that associate a low value to themselves (speakers). The grand strategy of politeness is largely comparable to Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness strategies. Leech (2007) also hypothesized that these variables are differently manipulated in different cultures and can reflect the social norms and particular concepts of face in a given society.

Another line of criticism of Brown and Levinson's model is made on the fact that the concept of politeness basically cannot be quantified. Some researchers have particularly challenged Brown and Levinson's attempts to measure the weight of politeness as the sum of particular linguistic tokens. Arguing for politeness as appropriateness, Locher and Watts (2005) and Watts (2003), for example, set the aim of politeness studies as the folk interpretation of politeness and claimed that it is the only logical means of developing a social theory of politeness. From the perspective of these researchers, determining appropriateness is extremely dependent on the local contexts and thus should be only examined by considering the entire context.

Acknowledging the existence of contextually-sensitive and socially-loaded conception of politeness, some linguists, however, focus on the linguistic aspects of politeness as the object of their studies and, therefore, argue that the quantitative studies of politeness should also be possible. Such studies, if successfully designed and conducted, could serve as empirical tests of various models of politeness.

A further wave of challenge toward Brown and Levinson's model has concerned the overriding emphasis on face as a main motivation for politeness (Fraser, 1990; Locher & Watts, 2005). On this score, some linguists such as Locher and Watts argue that Brown and Levinson's theory is indeed a framework for the study of face not a theory of politeness. These authors suggest that Brown and Levinson's model of politeness could be integrated into a larger theory of relational work, where accounts of face, politeness, and political behavior are all taken into account.

Undoubtedly, most interactions can best be understood by taking into account the entire contextual situations. However, in any theoretical study, a certain level of abstraction is unavoidable for the goals of the theory-based studies of language. It might be well the case that some contextual features of language are lost in an abstract formulation of language. Therefore, whether or not the concept of politeness formulated based on a linguistic examination is valid is an empirical question, one that this study intends to explore.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 20 male (7) and female (13) university students studying English at Ershad University, Tehran, Iran. The participants were all native speakers of Persian and had not resided in any English-speaking country prior to their participation in this study.

3.2. Design

In order to identify and analyze the decisive factors in determining the participants' choice of politeness strategies, a qualitative approach was adopted in which concurrent think aloud protocols were employed to gain deeper insights into the latent and unobservable learning processes that occurred in participants' minds as they engaged in the designated research task.

3.3. Instruments and data collection procedure

Since there was not any appropriate research instrument for the purpose of this study, the researcher developed a multiple-choice discourse completion test/questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire included demographic information along with the necessary directions and instructions to be followed by the participants to do the required tasks. Following the first part, the second part was devoted to five scenarios each of which involved a situation which required a request. Each scenario was followed by three possible request options one of which was supposed to be chosen by the participants. The third section included five scenarios each including a situation in which an apology was demanded; again, each situation was followed by three apology choices to be selected by the participants based on their preferences (see Appendix). The participants were individually invited to participate in a series of concurrent think aloud protocols as they were selecting the items of the questionnaire. Indeed, the participants were asked to expand on their responses. In particular, they were asked to explain why they chose particular politeness strategies. The think aloud protocols were audio recorded and transcribed in full. The analysis of the transcriptions involved mapping the participants' comments onto the section of the questionnaire they related to. The data provided broad categories for analyzing concerns they had in their strategy choices. The transcripts were then coded in relation to the broad categories formulated in Brown and Levinson's theory (1987).

4. Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the main factors that influence the politeness strategies that Iranian English language learners employ when they apologize and make requests. The summaries that follow represent the participants' explanations in the think aloud protocols. Attempts have been made to provide relevant quotes from the participants' responses to convey key themes and what they typically said about their choice of strategies. It should be mentioned, however, that although the participants who participated in this study were heterogeneous in many respects, the obtained qualitative results cannot be generalized to other cultures. Therefore, the findings in this study provide provisional information about the decisive factors in determining politeness strategies.

4.1. Analysis of requests

The first socio-cultural theme that emerged from the analysis of the think aloud protocols was the power distance that the participants felt between themselves and the people they were assumed to be interacting with. This was particularly evident in scenarios where the participants were supposed to request something from a person with whom they had an asymmetrical social relationship (e.g., scenarios 1 and 4). The following assertions made by some of the participants capture this concern:

It does not seem appropriate to ask a teacher in this way...

Because, I should ask my professor very politely to explain the issue for me again.

Basically, when I talk to my teachers, I use formal and respectful wordings.

When you speak so boldly and directly to your instructor, he will definitely get offended.

These assertions imply that from the participants' perspectives, the type of power relationship that they have with the interlocutors is, perhaps, an important factor in determining the degree of their politeness.

Another noteworthy, yet interrelated, theme in the participants' explanations was that some of the learners acknowledged that they sporadically use less elaborate positive strategies or choose to use positive rather than negative politeness when speaking with friends, classmates or family members. They could clearly distinguish kin or friend from people with whom they were of the same social status, but who were still separated by social distance. For instance, in their elaborations, some of the participants expressed that their close relationships with their classmates and family members (as reflected in scenarios 2 and 5) were a driving force behind their choice of politeness strategies:

I choose to say, "You'd better move away or sit down," because I am talking to my sister and my tone of language must be both informal and intimate.

I would simply ask him [my classmate] to give me a piece of paper because I don't think I have to say very formally "I wonder if you...". It is also more common and typical.

You know, here I just want to talk to my classmate not my supervisor. I would try to observe my social bonds and respect our intimacy. When you use a formal language to talk to a classmate, it seems like s/he owes you something.

Here you are in your home, talking with your sister over a football game. The whole context is rather informal, and considering your relationship you are not supposed to speak formally and for a long time to ask for a simple thing...

It is also possible to ask her just by a simple gesture or a facial expression.

Consistent with the widespread assumption that the social distance between the parties involved in interpersonal communications plays a key role in determining the quality and choice of politeness strategies, the above quotes suggest that this assumption holds true for the participants of this research as well. Although these quotes do not clearly show how this assumption can be formulated with regard to the concrete activities happening in particular situations, they do emphasize its presence in the eyes of Iranian English language learners.

The review of the literature showed that the absolute ranking of the threat of the face-threatening act is also among the decisive factors in determining the choice of politeness strategies. For the learners involved in this study, weight of imposition was very often a key factor in the development of their interlanguage pragmatics.

It is a simple request I am trying to make... I have not done anything wrong, I just want her to show me the shirt... Just an "excuse me" would suffice.

I prefer the third option because a salesperson's job is to show his stuff and to sell them anyway, and that is exactly what I am asking him to do for me.

I have never seen anybody saying please do me a favor in situations like this.

Although in the scenarios tested in the present study the participants were not asked various questions where they could show the full potential of their pragmatic knowledge, they were, as the above assertions show, quite aware of the fact that the mere magnitude of the request can, to some extent, fluctuate the politeness level of their verbal communications.

4.2. Analysis of apologies

Participants' responses to the request items revealed the significance of some of the determining factors in the degree of their politeness strategies. Throughout the follow-up apology scenarios, they were further asked to explain and elaborate on their choice of strategies. In line with the theoretical frameworks in the literature, the findings of the previous section revealed that to determine what is pragmatically appropriate, Iranian English learners evaluated many of the contextual factors surrounding the scenarios. Some specific examples of how these factors affected their strategy choices were mentioned. The three most common factors affecting the politeness of an utterance were shown to be social distance, power relations and level of imposition. In what follows, attempts are made to discuss these results with direct quotes from the participants used to illustrate and exemplify the points.

As mentioned before, social distance refers to the relationship between the interlocutors. If two people are very close, they will have a low degree of social distance. Two strangers would typically have a high degree of social distance. In some of

the scenarios used in this experiment, a high degree of social distance was assumed to exist between the parties. The participants' choices of strategies were consequently rather formal.

I explain to convince him that it was my mistake.

I would definitely choose C, because it is more formal and more polite.

Basically, we can imagine three types of power relationships between interlocutors. In the first case, one would have equal power with the person he is talking to (e.g., a friend or colleague). In the other two, one would either have more power (e.g., as a boss, teacher) or less power (e.g., employee, student) than the person he is talking to. As the following assertions show, in traditional contexts like Iran, more formal and indirect language is typically used in situations where one is engaged in an interaction with the person who has more power (Rudy & Grusec, 2006).

I would choose A because I cannot do anything else... option B seems to be too rude, and C is too formal, classmates do not usually talk in this way.

When I apologize and explain for my teachers the reason why I fell asleep...

I have to respect him because the teacher may get angry... so I have to be polite.

Additionally, rank of imposition seemed to have been considered seriously by the learners. As a matter of fact, the explanations that the participants provided seemed to have augmented the reasons that they previously mentioned in the case of request making.

Because I have hurt him... and this is the least I can do.

I need to buy a new book and make up for what I have done.

4.3. Problems associated with Brown and Levinson's model

The results presented above are mainly in line with Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness (1987). However, an in-depth analysis of the results revealed some further complexities in the participants' choice of politeness strategies. Particularly, the findings suggest that the factors that influence people's choice of politeness strategies do not function on a linear basis; rather, they seem to work best within a more dynamic system. In what follows I present parts of the participants' assertions that could not be properly explained in light of Brown and Levinson's theory.

When I'm watching soccer, or any other program on TV, and somebody blocks my view, I would get angry and shout...

I don't care who they are, they should not do that... I would say get out of my face...

It depends on what has made me ask that question. It might be the case that you have a positive relationship with your hearer, so you are normally expected to show respect, but if there is a negative background, you might be discouraged to be very polite in your request.

It's not important what you're asking. It is important who you are talking to. When you talk to a professor, you are expected to show respect...

These quotations seem to imply that the level of politeness in communication is, prior to any choice of politeness strategies, determined at a higher level where the speakers make a *grand* decision to the effect whether or not they intend to behave politely. In other words, the data suggest that the influential factors in regulating speakers' choice of politeness strategies work within a broader system. Therefore, people's choice of level of politeness might be governed at a more holistic level.

Basically, a system is an inter-related set of elements that are organized into a structural whole that is often self-regulated. The concept of system implies that if a complex phenomenon has holistic properties, the phenomenon cannot be explored by analyzing the individual components separately. Understanding the inter-relationship among the components and the way they influence one another is also required (Kitao et al., 1987). As previously discussed, in Brown and Levinson's theory (1987), three independent variables are intended to explain the weight of face threatening acts and justify people's choice of politeness strategies. One of the limitations of applying this theory for analyzing the participants' choice of strategies is that it can explain how politeness strategies are chosen one at a time, but does not offer any explanations about how such strategies are adjusted over time. A systemic model of politeness, however, seems to have the potential of showing how different variables can work together to achieve the goal of speech acts while also maintaining the face. The following quotes stated by some of the participants support this systematic model.

When somebody's rights are violated, then I might do anything to please him... In this scenario I did not pay the money, and I left the bookstore. So I have to go back and apologize, I don't think I would be able to justify my inappropriate behavior in a couple of sentences.

Well I have to know how she is going to react, and then depending on her behavior I would decide what to say and how to say it.

Sometimes you just say I am sorry, and he forgives you though he deserves the rights not to forgive you...

A further relevant problem associated with Brown and Levinson's model concerns the additive values of the three variables indicated by Brown and Levinson (the social distance between speaker and hearer, the power relations between speaker and listener, and the rank of imposition). As previously mentioned, this attempt has been criticized for being over-simplistic. The findings of this study show that the emphasis on the linear calculation of politeness is perhaps misguided, and that a more socially motivated conception of politeness might be more fruitful in the analysis of politeness.

The quotations cited above show that the interlocutor's social motivations are further driving forces that are missing in Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. Sankoff and Leberge (1978) refer to these influential factors as the *speaker investment*. Speaker investment in Sankoff and Leberge's words represents the extent to which speakers intend to appear polite in their social interactions. It can also account for variations of politeness in different cultures.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, Brown and Levinson's model of three contributing factors to politeness was employed to analyze the requests and apologies made by Iranian EFL learners. The study aimed at demonstrating the potential of Brown and Levinson's model in determining politeness strategies employed by the participants. The results of the study revealed that Brown and Levinson's model can account, to a large extent, for people's choice of politeness strategies in making both requests and apologies. In particular, the findings pointed to the ubiquitous presence of three influential factors in the degree of politeness; that is power relations, social distance, and rank of imposition in the participants' choice of politeness strategies. However, the findings of the study indicate that there are a few shortcomings associated with Brown and Levinson's model.

The study suggests that the weight of politeness cannot be simply measured based on a linear, static basis. The findings support that for the individuals who participated in this study politeness is a heavily context-bound and highly dynamic concept. On this basis I hypothesize that a systematic model of politeness can better explain the variations of individuals' choice of politeness strategies. Such a model can also incorporate the interlocutors' *grand* decision concerning their commitment for polite behaviors. Therefore, the findings provide empirical support in favor of Leech's arguments (2007) for the existence of a grand strategy of politeness. Leech discusses that a super constraint governs the whole politeness phenomenon in our daily interactions. Leech (2007) further hypothesizes that a grand strategy of politeness can reflect the social norms and particular concepts of politeness in different speech communities.

Although parts of the findings exhibit certain features of politeness that are in accordance with the criteria of Brown and Levinson's theory of 'politeness', consistent with the literature, the results also partially indicate that there is considerable room for expanding Brown and Levinson's model of politeness by focusing on the broader context where social interactions take place. Granted the fact that Brown and Levinson's politeness formulation is basically a linguistic model rather than a social theory, one may assume that a non-linguistic model of politeness must necessarily take into account the role of context and cultural variations in determining politeness behaviors.

Although this study provides some empirical findings regarding the limitations of Brown and Levinson's theory (1978, 1987), it contains methodological limitations some of which may provide avenues for future research. The scenario items were limited both in number and in scope to investigate interpersonal relationships between a person and the interlocutor. If more variations in the scenarios were incorporated, perhaps more complexities of politeness as a social concept could be revealed, and I would be able to identify even further effects of factors influencing politeness strategies. Additionally, this study merely focused on two types of speech acts, namely requests and apologies, and I collected the data only through questionnaire items and think aloud protocols. Previous research suggests that politeness strategies are more complicated when observing authentic conversation data (Hayashi, 1988; Saito, 2010). Thus, future studies can analyze politeness features of authentic communications. Furthermore, complementary studies can address politeness strategies in other speech acts such as promising, informing, etc.

6. References

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7. Appendix

Pragmatics Test: Request and Apology

Participant Background:

- a. First Name: _____ Last Name: _____
 b. University Degree: _____
 c. Major: _____
 d. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female
 e. Residence in an English-speaking Country: No ☐ Yes ☐ (If yes, for years)

Directions: Please read each of the following situations in which a person makes a/an apology/request. There are three answers following each situation. While you are reading each situation to decide which one is the **most appropriate** answer, think aloud to show the criteria you use to select the correct answer and reject the incorrect answers. Then circle the letter of the correct answer.

I. Request

1. You have a listening class and you cannot hear what is played on T.V. How would you ask your teacher to turn it up?

- A. Pardon me, but I cannot hear.
 B. I'll ask you to turn it up.
 C. What? Turn it up please.

2. You need a piece of paper to write a letter. How would you ask your classmate for it?

- A. Can you give me a piece of paper? I need it to write a letter.
 B. I wonder if you could possibly give me a piece of paper for my letter.
 C. Hey, don't hesitate to give me a piece of paper. I need it right now!

3. You are now shopping in a department store. You see a beautiful shirt and want to see it. How would you ask the salesperson to show you the shirt?

- A. Oh, sorry, could you pass that shirt to me to have a look? I want to buy it.
 B. Lady, I'd like to have a look at that shirt. Would you please do me a favor?
 C. Excuse me. Could you show me this shirt please?

4. You are now discussing your assignment with your teacher. Your teacher speaks very fast. You do not follow what he is saying. How would you ask your teacher to say it again?

- A. You speak so rapidly that nothing can be understood.
 B. Sorry, teacher, repeat the point. I didn't get it.
 C. Excuse me. May I ask you to explain it again?

5. You are watching a football game. Your sister comes and stands just in front of you blocking your view. You want to ask her not to block your view. What would you say?

- A. So you are interested in football. So am I. Let me stand beside you and exchange opinions about the game.
 B. Sorry, you are blocking my view. Would you please take another place?
 C. Hey. You'd better move away or sit down.

II. Apology

1. In a bookstore, you accidentally find a book that you have been looking for a long time. You are so excited that you rush out of the bookstore with the book without paying for it. The shop assistant stops you. How would you apologize?

- A. Sorry! I was too happy! I like this book and have been looking for it for a long time.
 B. Excuse me. I've been looking for the book for a long time. I hope you can forgive my behavior. I'll be careful next time.
 C. Oh, I'm very sorry. I was so excited about finding this book that I just forgot to pay. How much do I owe you?

2. You are now rushing to the classroom. When you turn a corner, you accidentally bump into a student whom you do not know and the books he is carrying fall onto the ground. How would you apologize?

- A. Oops, sorry, my fault. I'm in such a hurry. Here let me help pick these up for you.
- B. I will be late if I'm not in a hurry. I'll pay attention to this when I turn corner next time.
- C. Oh, I'm ashamed. I'm going to be late for my class, and if I'm late, I won't be allowed to enter the classroom. But I like this course very much. Take care!

3. You borrowed a book from a library, but you accidentally spilled a cup of coffee all over it. You return it to the librarian. How would you apologize?

- A. Sorry, it was an accident, chill out.
- B. I am deeply sorry. Please allow me to replace the copy.
- C. Well, accidents happen, you know?

4. You are playing on the playground with your classmates. You take a shot and the ball hits a student on the back of the head. You go up to the student. How would you apologize?

- A. Are you all right? I'm sorry I hit you!
- B. Dear student, I'm sorry for that! We have to be more careful.
- C. I didn't realize you were coming. You'd better move away.

5. You are almost asleep in the class while the teacher is teaching. The teacher gets very angry when he sees you sleeping in the class. How would you apologize?

- A. I'm sorry; I will try and not let it happen again.
- B. I'm sorry, but I didn't sleep a wink last night.
- C. Pardon me. I'm ashamed.

