

# COURSE: SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS

LECTURE 14: POLITENESS AND INTERACTION

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# POLITENESS AND INTERACTION

Linguistic interaction is also social interaction.

What we say is determined by our social relationships.

we look at various factors which relate to social distance and closeness.

# Politeness

- ▶ Yule (1996), Brown and Levinson (1987); politeness in interaction can be defined as a means employed to show awareness of another person's face.
- ▶ Yule, George. (1996). Pragmatics. UK: Oxford University press. Pg.59-76
- ▶ Brown, Penelope & Levinson, Stephen. (1987). Politeness: Some universals in language usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

# Politeness an interaction

**External factors** (established prior to interaction) influence our behaviour.

Relate to relative status of the participants, based on social values tied to such things as age and power.

Example:

Speakers who see themselves as lower status tend to mark social distance between themselves and higher status speakers by using address forms that include a title and a last name (ENGLISH)

# Honorifics in different languages

- ▶ **Kiswahili: Baba, Babu**
- ▶ **Sheng: mzae??**
- ▶ **Boss**
- ▶ **Mr**
- ▶ **Honourable members**
- ▶ **Your honour**
- ▶ **Vous....**

# Politeness and interaction

- ▶ **Internal factors** (may change during interaction).
- ▶ They include amount of imposition or degree of friendliness, which are negotiated during an interaction.
- ▶ Are internal and can result in the initial distance changing
- ▶ Relevant to participants whose social relations are in the process of being worked out within the interaction.

# Arrange these in order of politeness: (least polite first)

Set the table!

Could you please set the table?

Set the table, will you?

Would you mind if I asked you to set the table?

Can you set the table?

*TO WHOM ARE YOU LIKELY TO USE EACH OF THESE EXPRESIONS?*

# External and internal factors

- ▶ External and internal factors influence what we say and how we are interpreted.
- ▶ Interpretation may go beyond what we might have intended to communicate and includes evaluations such as
  - ▶ Rude, considerate, thoughtful etc.
  - ▶ The impact of these evaluations makes it clear that more is being communicated than is said.
  - ▶ This investigation is carried out through politeness.

# POLITENESS

- ▶ Recognized within cultures
- ▶ Etiquette/ polite social behaviour.
- ▶ E.g. being tactful, generous, modest and sympathetic towards others

# POLITENESS

A term often used when we talk about politeness is **face**.

Face means the public self -image of a person.

Face is awareness of other person's self image.

We show either distance/respect or friendliness/solidarity.

# Politeness

e.g.

Excuse me, Mr. Black, but can I talk to you for a minute?

Hey, Blacky, you got a minute?

These two examples indicate that there will be different kinds of politeness associated and marked linguistically with the assumption of relative distance and closeness.

The relative distance between participants in an interaction, determine the relative distance between them, and hence their 'Face wants'.

# Face wants

## FACE WANTS

= A person's expectations that their public self image will be respected.

## Face threatening act

= something that represents a threat to another individual's public self image. (use orders).

## Face saving act

= avoidance of a potential threat to a person's self image. (Use questions).

# Face threatening and face saving acts

- ▶ Imagine a late night scene, where a young neighbour is playing very loud music and an older couple are trying to sleep. One of them proposes a face threatening act and the other suggests a face saving act.

Man: I am going to stop that awful noise right now! (FACE THREATENING ACT)

Woman: Perhaps you could ask him if he is going to stop soon because it is getting a bit late and people need to get to sleep. (FACE SAVING ACT)

# Face saving and face threatening cases

- ▶ A neighbour spans a child for throwing stones towards his house.
- ▶ Upon receiving the reports:
- ▶ The mother: I am going to report him to the police
- ▶ The father: Let me talk to him and make him see why it is not safe to spank children.

# WAYS OF PERFORMING FACE SAVING ACTS

- ▶ NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FACE
- ▶ SELF AND OTHER: SAY NOTHING
- ▶ SAY SOMETHING: OFF AND ON RECORD



## NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FACE



Negative face = our right to independence of action and our need not to be imposed upon by others.

Positive face = our need to be accepted and liked by others and our need to feel that our social group shares common goals; our need to be connected.

# Negative face

**Negative politeness** = geared towards the need for independence, have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others.

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# Positive face

**Positive politeness** = preserving the positive face;

The need to be accepted, even liked by others or treated as a member of the same group,

and know that his or her wants are shared by others

Negative face- need to be independent

Positive face- need to be connected with others

# Face saving act

- ▶ A face saving act which is oriented to the person's negative face will tend to show respect, emphasize importance of the other's time or concerns, even include an apology for the imposition or interruption-negative politeness
- ▶ Face saving act which is oriented to the positive face will show solidarity, emphasize that both the speakers want the same thing and they have a common goal-positive politeness.

# How to make people see your needs:

Say nothing but let action speak.

Talk to yourself.

Ask someone, speak on record or use *mitigating devices* (*please*).

Let's look at an example:

# You want to borrow someone's stapler. How do you go about it?

**Say nothing** but act. Look around for one, handle your papers.

**Say something**, either **off record** (i.e.. talking to yourself) or **on record** (i.e.. addressing someone)

*Lend me  
your  
stapler. =Bald  
on record*

*Lend me your  
stapler, please.*

# Politeness strategies

Words that soften demands like *please* are called **mitigating devices**.

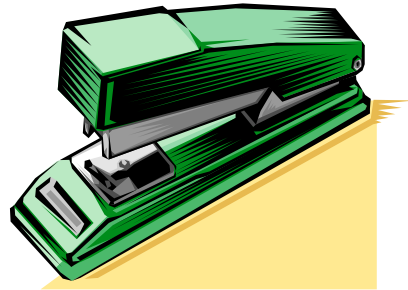
If these are not present , we talk of **bald on record**.

Yule, George. Pragmatics. UK: Oxford pg. 76.

# Politeness strategies

Positive politeness strategies; appeal to solidarity:

*It would be really nice of you if I could borrow your...*



Negative politeness strategies; awareness of other's right not to be imposed upon: *I know you probably need it yourself, but could I possibly use...*

# Politeness strategies

Strategies:

**Solidarity strategy:** emphasizes closeness to addressee.  
Involves personal information, first names, nicknames etc  
. *We, let's, dialect, nicknames. (Informal communication)*

**Deference strategy:** emphasizes the non-personal.  
Formal politeness.

# ACTS AND PRE-ACTS

Sometimes we need to prepare the addressee for what is to come, so we have pre-requests, pre-invitations, pre-announcements.

- *Are you busy?*
- *Are you doing anything on Saturday?*
- *Want to hear something interesting?*

# Pre-requests

- ▶ Her: Are you busy?(PRE- REQUEST)
- ▶ Him: Not really.(GO AHEAD)
- ▶ Her: Check over this memo. (REQUEST)
- ▶ Him: Okay (ACCEPT)
- ▶ \*\*\*\*\*
- ▶ HIM: Are you busy? (PRE-REQUEST)
- ▶ Her: oh, Sorry. (stop)

# Pre-invitation

- ▶ Him: what are you doing this Friday?(pre invitation)
- ▶ Her: Hmm, nothing so far.(go ahead)
- ▶ Him: Come over for dinner (invitation)
- ▶ Her: Oh, I'd like that. (accept)
- ▶ \*\*\*\*\*
- ▶ Him: Are you doing anything later?(pre invitation)
- ▶ Her: Oh, yeah. Busy,busy, busy.(stop)
- ▶ Him: Oh, Okay (stop)

# Pre-announcement

- ▶ CHILD: Mom, guess what happened.(Pre- announcement)
- ▶ Mother: (silence).(stop)
- ▶ Child: Mom, you know what?(pre- announcement)
- ▶ Mother: Not right now, Jane, I'm busy. (stop)

# Revisiting preference structures

- ▶ What is preferred is a matter of politeness:
- ▶ Sometimes even when we are not willing to do something, we accept to save face
- ▶ In other cases, we engage in face threatening acts and refuse, deny or reject some actions.

# PREFERENCE STRUCTURES

Adjacency pairs are not simply countless noises in a sequence.

They represent social actions

not all social actions are equal when they occur as second pairs

A first part that contains a request or an offer is made in the expectation that the second part will be an acceptance.

An acceptance is more likely than a refusal

This structural likelihood is called preference.

# Preference structures

- ▶ Preference structure divides second parts of adjacency pairs into **preferred** and **non-preferred** social acts.
- ▶ The **preferred** is the structurally expected next act and the **dispreferred** is the structurally unexpected next.

# General pattern of preferred and dispreferred

First part	Second part	
	Preferred	Dispreferred.
Assessment	Agree	Disagree
Invitation	Accept	refuse
Offer	Accept	Decline
Proposal	Agree	Disagree
Request	Accept	Refuse

# Examples of preferred second part

First part	Second part
Can you help me?	Sure.
Want some coffee?	Yes, please.
Isn't that really great? May be we could go for a walk.	Yes it is  That would be great.
What if these first parts were met with silence?	Then there will be uneasiness or no further communication.

# Patterns associate with dispreferred second parts

Dispreferred elements	Examples.
Delay/hesitate	Pause: er, em, ah
Preface	Well,oh
Express doubt	I'm not sure, I don't know
Token (yes)	That is great, I would love to but....
Apology	I'm sorry I cannot .....; what a pity I cannot..
Mention obligation	I must do X; I am expected in Y
Appeal for understanding	You see....; you know....
Make it non personal	Everybody else .....; out there...
Give an account.....	Too much work, no time left
Use mitigators	Really, mostly, sort of, kind of..
Hedge the negative	I guess not; not possible

# Summary

- ▶ We have looked at:
- ▶ Politeness- all cultures value politeness
- ▶ Face saving acts
- ▶ Face threatening acts
- ▶ Negative politeness
- ▶ Positive politeness
- ▶ Politeness strategies.

# References

- ▶ Yule, George. (1996). Pragmatics. UK: Oxford University press. Pg.59-76
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