

The Politeness Theory and Intercultural Workplace Communication: A critical analysis

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Abstract

This paper discusses the theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and the validity of its role in intercultural workplace communication. With a focus on common workplace communication forms, including requests, conflict management, humour and computer-mediated communication, it will critically analyse the application of the politeness theory to workplace communication in intercultural settings and examine the contributions the politeness theory has made to facilitating understanding in intercultural communication contexts in the era of globalisation.

本稿はブラウンとレヴィンソンのポライトネス理論の枠組みと多文化的な職場における役割の妥当性について論じる。本稿は依頼や対立管理、ユーモア、コンピューター経由のコミュニケーションなども含む、一般的な職場におけるコミュニケーション形態に焦点をあて、多文化的に設定された職場へのポライトネス理論の適用を批判的に分析すると共に、ポライトネス理論が果たしてきたグローバル化時代の多文化的な文脈において容易な理解への貢献を検証するものである。

Keywords: Politeness Theory, intercultural workplace communication, globalisation

Introduction

In most workplaces it is safe to assume that not all members will share the same communication styles, and this is intensified in intercultural workplace settings. Individuals need to adapt to different discourse practices and acknowledge culture-specific meanings, due to static views of 'best practice' leading to communication failure and negative stereotyping. Although doubt has been expressed over its universality, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, when applied to different cultures, can reveal variations in cultural norms in terms of politeness strategies, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding (Ogiermann, 2009; Callahan, 2011; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015).

This paper provides a description of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory followed by a summary of arguments against its universality. The next section will focus on the application of the politeness theory to different forms of common workplace communication: requests, conflict management, humour, and computer-mediated communication (emails), and based on recent studies, critically analyse the application of the politeness

theory to workplace communication in intercultural settings, highlighting cultural variations in communication styles. The conclusion will discuss the contributions the politeness theory has made to facilitating understanding in intercultural communication contexts, and emphasise the importance of cross-cultural understanding, particularly in intercultural workplaces, due to an increase in globalisation.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) have become pioneers in the field of sociolinguist theoretical frameworks concerning politeness by stressing the importance of politeness to facilitate successful communication between interlocutors (Bayles, 2009). Their model is based on the notion of *face*, a concept first introduced by Goffman, which refers to linguistic behaviours adopted by individuals in order to present a positive self-image ('face') in social interaction. This may include appearing competent in their role performances, and being supportive of the role performances of others (Morand & Ocker, 2003). "Face" consists of two distinct types of desires or *face-wants*: the desire to be approved of (positive face), and one's desire to be unrestricted in their actions (negative face) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The *Politeness Theory* highlights how face is exposed throughout interaction, and revolves around the existence of *Face Threatening Acts* (FTAs), which may include acts of disagreement, imposing, interrupting, requesting information or goods, and criticising (Morand & Ocker, 2003; Bayles, 2009). According to Brown and Levinson, individuals adopt a politeness strategy appropriate to the degree to which an act is considered face threatening. A speaker may choose a 'bald on-record' utterance that makes little or no attempt to mitigate an FTA (i.e. 'Bring me the book!') These are chosen to communicate a message clearly, without ambiguity, and when a speaker does not fear retaliation from a hearer. Speakers may also adopt positive or negative politeness strategies to minimise the effect of an FTA to a hearer's positive or negative face. In this case, a speaker employs redressive action to address a hearer's positive and negative face wants (i.e. 'Is it alright for me to come in?' – positive politeness strategy; 'Sorry to bother you, but can I come in?' – negative politeness strategy). When speakers go 'off-record' they choose an indirect strategy, causing ambiguity and posing no threat to face (i.e. I really wish we could talk), or speakers may opt not to do an FTA (Morand & Ocker, 2003; Fukada & Asato, 2004; Bayles, 2009).

To measure the degree of an FTA, Brown and Levinson propose the following formula consisting of three factors:

$$Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Rx$$

Wx is the weight of an FTA, D measures the social distance ($D(S, H)$) between interlocutors, P refers to the power that the hearer has over the speaker ($P(H, S)$), and R is the value that measures the degree to which an FTA is considered an imposition in a certain culture (Rx). Brown and Levinson point out that all three factors are relevant, yet independent of one another, and interact to determine how individuals engage in facework. Brown and Levinson claim their Politeness Theory is universal under the assumption that the motivation governing facework behaviour is a universal trait for all people (Kiyama, Tamaoka & Takiura, 2012).

The Politeness Theory: criticisms of universality

Although the formula suggested by Brown and Levinson has been supported by several empirical studies, some Japan-based researchers argue that the theory is constructed based on Anglo-Saxon culture, and does not allow for

variation between cultures (Fukada & Asato, 2004; Kiyama, Tamaoka & Takiura, 2012; Lim, 2017). Matsumoto (1989) questions the politeness theory's ability to explain the Japanese honorific phenomenon based on the assumption that the Japanese language is sensitive to social context. Contrary to Brown and Levinson's claim, Matsumoto contends that Japanese honorifics are a type of 'relation-acknowledging device' that indicate status differences between interlocutors, rather than a politeness tactic to redress an FTA (Matsumoto, 1989; Fukada & Asato, 2004). Ide (1989) claims that two types of linguistic politeness exist, volitional and discernment. According to Ide, the volitional type of politeness is motivated by a speaker's intention and realized by verbal strategies, and the discernment type of politeness is governed by discernment (socially prescribed norms), and communicated by the employment of linguistic forms (Ide, 1989). Ide argues that discernment politeness, which she claims plays a crucial role in the Japanese linguistic politeness system, has been overlooked in Brown and Levinson's model. Ide further suggests that Japanese honorifics are used based on social convention rather than to save face since they are often used in non-FTA situations (Ide, 1989; Fukada & Asato, 2004).

Fukada and Asato (2004) counter-argue that Japanese honorifics can be explained by the politeness theory. They claim that the variables 'distance' and 'power' included in the politeness theory dictate the use of honorifics when a person of higher status is involved, even in non-FTA situations, because whether an act is intrinsically face-threatening or not, these elements increase the weightiness of the FTA and the act will be considered face threatening.

Matsumoto and Ide's arguments that the use of Japanese honorifics is determined by perceptions of appropriateness in social interactions as opposed to volitional politeness strategies are supported by the undisputed fact that Japan adopts a collectivist culture, promoting hierarchical roles and relationships, and the associated obligatory socio-pragmatic linguistic forms (DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Conversely, Fukada and Asato make an interesting point when they argue that there are exceptions in social interactions where a socially superior person may use honorifics (when a boss asks an employee for a favour for example), which supports the inclusion of Japanese honorifics as negative politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's model.

Matsumura, Chinami and Kim (n.d.) claim that discernment politeness found in Japanese is also evident in Korean politeness. However, they argue that although both Japanese and Korean politeness is based on conformity to social conventions, variation still exists in the appropriate use of strategies derived from their cultural differences. To support their claim, Matsumura, Chinami & Kim illustrate how some social situations in Korea can be perceived as awkward or impolite by Japanese people, and vice versa. Some examples include Korean people using respect words with their parents, or Japanese people of a higher social-standing using honorifics when talking to people of a lower social-standing. Their paper suggests the need for a politeness theory that is more inclusive of cultural variability at its basic level (Matsumura, Chinami & Kim, n.d.)

Bergelson (2003) highlights how communication failure can occur in business contexts across Anglo-American and Russian cultures as a result of a 'wrong' politeness strategy being used. Bergelson clarifies that 'wrong' in this context does not mean incorrect, but instead refers to "different from what the addressee for the given communicative act expects on the basis of his own culturally conditioned communicative competence" (p. 103). Bergelson argues that the adoption of politeness strategies based on varying cultural norms can lead to negative stereotyping and communication breakdowns, providing further support for the claim that politeness strategies

are culturally determined rather than universal patterns of behaviour (Bergelson, 2003).

Application of the Politeness Theory to intercultural workplace communication

The Politeness Theory has been applied to a variety of speech acts in informal settings, and more recently to institutional settings and workplaces. Workplace communication can take many forms including, requests, conflict management, humour, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (i.e. emails).

Requests

Requests have emerged as being a particularly popular focus in both empirical and theoretical studies on politeness. They are central to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, and in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research they are the most frequently studied speech act (Ogiermann, 2009). According to Brown and Levinson's theory, requests are likely to threaten the face of both the speaker and the hearer. The theory also suggests a positive correlation between indirectness and politeness based on the view that politeness deviates from Grice's Cooperative Principle. 'Off-record' strategies are explained to flout Grice's conversational maxims (i.e. Maxim of Quality; Maxim of Manner), in exchange for a focus on face-redress, while mitigated 'on-record' politeness tactics have the advantage of being clear and polite simultaneously. In contrast, bald on-record strategies are seen as conforming to Grice's maxims due to their focus on clarity and efficiency, and lack of attention to face wants (Bergelson, 2003; Ogiermann, 2009). The Politeness Theory describes these levels of directness as universal, and equates indirectness with politeness, and clarity and directness as a neglect of the hearer's face. Although this has been attested in several empirical studies, there is an opposing view that this interpretation solely reflects Anglo-Saxon cultural values (Ogiermann, 2009).

Ogiermann (2009) and Wierzbicka (as cited in Lim, 2017) argue that Brown and Levinson's theory does not account for cultures such as Russian and Polish that value pragmatic clarity and associate directness with honesty. Both Russian and Polish have been shown to favour directness and frankness over the avoidance of face-loss, and consequently, in some contexts, indirect requests can be seen to increase the hearer's interpretive demands and make the speaker sound manipulative and devious. Although Ogiermann claims that Brown and Levinson's theory has an over-emphasis on the hearer's autonomy, she acknowledges that the theory recognises the positive and negative face of the speaker and highlights how verbal interactions such as requests tend to impact on the face of both the speaker and the hearer. One example is off-record politeness strategies, which satisfy a hearer's negative face to a greater extent than a negative politeness tactic, and also allow the speaker to avoid the inevitable accountability for their actions associated with on-record politeness strategies. Off-record strategies offer opportunities for both the speaker and the hearer to avoid face-loss; the hearer may ignore the hint to refuse a request, and the speaker has the option of continuing the conversation without acknowledging a request that has been ignored (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Ogiermann, 2009). Ogiermann points out that speakers who associate indirectness with politeness may view off-record requests as strategies that focus on the hearer's negative face, however, speakers pertaining to cultures that adopt more direct conversational practices are likely to perceive off-record requests as benefiting the speaker's face while further imposing on the hearer's negative face.

In intercultural workplace contexts, pragmatic norms that pertain to different cultures can lead to conflicting

conversational practices and rules of politeness (Beal, 1990). With a focus on requests, Christine Béal (1990) conducted a study on typical problems that can occur in intercultural communication between native speakers of Australian English and native French speakers in the workplace. Her study reveals three major causes of tension and misunderstanding: “differences in politeness strategies, differences in the assessment of what constitutes a face-threatening act, and clashes between face wants and other wants” (p. 19). In her study, Béal identifies the adoption of different politeness strategies by native French and Australian English speakers when making requests, as contributing to communication breakdowns in the workplace. Her study shows that when making requests, native French speakers would attempt to mitigate the face-threatening act by using an impersonal verb to “impersonalise the speaker and hearer” (p. 19), while native Australian English speakers would use a more indirect utterance such as ‘you couldn’t possibly...(do something for me)’. Furthermore, Béal’s study highlights how, in relation to requests, native French speakers are more inclined to choose positive politeness strategies, whereas speakers of Australian English tend to favour negative politeness strategies, both verbally and in terms of proxemics. This is evident by the way speakers from both cultures ‘ritually approach’ somebody else with a request: native French speakers adopting a more direct approach with no ‘introduction’ and the onus being on the person being approached to ensure the person making the request is not made to feel like an intruder (a typical characteristic of positive politeness), and the Australians making their presence known and using a speech act such as “Sorry can I interrupt you for a moment?” (p.21) commonly featured in negative politeness strategies. As mentioned previously, according to Brown and Levinson, a politeness strategy is considered a deviation from Grice’s maxims and consequently, a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In her paper, Béal points out that French and Australian speakers have different methods of assessing whether a request is a face-threatening act or otherwise, supporting the notion that FTAs are culturally-bound. In addressing her third cause of workplace tension, Béal argues that the importance given to satisfying a face-want may differ from culture to culture, and clashes in cultural norms can be a source of conflict. From these examples alone, it’s easy to see how variations of sociolinguistic rules in speech acts such as requests are likely to clash and cause conflict in cross-cultural communication contexts such as the workplace.

Conflict Management and humour

Dealing with conflict is a natural part of workplace culture on a daily basis. However, when interactions take place in contexts consisting of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, miscommunications can occur and tensions can become intensified. These misunderstandings often stem from differing conflict management styles, face wants, and assumptions and expectations in the workplace (Brew & Cairns, 2004). ‘Face’, the concept upon which Brown and Levinson’s model is based, plays a central role in determining how individuals deal with conflict. According to Ting-Toomey (1988, in Brew & Cairns, 2004), distinguishing between concern for self-face (one’s own face) and concern for other-face (the hearer’s face) is crucial in understanding conflict negotiation, because in individualist cultures, such as Australian and American cultures, “self” and “other” are separate entities, whereas in collectivist cultures, such as Chinese and Japanese cultures, they are interdependent. Ting-Toomey also claims that people belonging to individualist cultures use more ‘autonomy-saving strategies’, or negative politeness strategies that address negative-face wants in conflict management. In contrast, she argues members

of collectivist cultures use more ‘approval-seeking strategies’, or positive politeness tactics that address positive-face wants when managing conflict (Morisaki & Gudykunst, 1994).

Power is another significant component of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. Illustrated by their formula (see ‘Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory’ section), Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that power (P), social distance (D) and the rating of impositions based on the extent to which they interfere with an individual’s positive and negative face wants (R), “contribute to the seriousness of an FTA, and thus to a determination of the level of politeness with which, other things being equal, an FTA will be communicated” (p.76). In other words, their formula predicts that individuals will choose a level of mitigation determined by the weightiness of an FTA, the more serious the FTA, the higher the level of mitigation. Brown and Levinson define power as “an asymmetric social dimension of relative power, i.e., $P(H, S)$ is the degree to which H can impose his own plans and his self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S’s plans and self-evaluation” (p. 77). They suggest that power can be derived from both material control and metaphysical control, and in most cases an individual’s power is the accumulation of both.

Brown and Levinson’s definition of power, and their formula featuring power predict that in hierarchical structures such as workplaces, the greater the power distance, the less the superior will mitigate FTAs, and the more the subordinate will use redressive strategies (Holmes, 2000; Harris, 2003). Brew and Cairns (2004) conducted a study on Chinese and Anglo-Australians and their styles of managing interpersonal workplace conflict. Their study showed that, overall, Anglo Australians preferred more direct communication than Chinese in workplace conflict situations involving face-threat, supporting results from previous empirical studies on individualist and collective cultures. However, both groups were found to favour more direct communication when self-face was threatened as opposed to other-face threat. In the subordinate condition, both Anglo Australians and Chinese adopted more direct communication styles with self-face threat than other-face threat, and unexpectedly, in positions of superiority, both groups preferred more indirect communication styles with other-face threat than self-face threat, contrary to predictions made by Brown and Levinson.

Humour has been identified as a management strategy for attenuating or reinforcing power relationships, and is also often used to diffuse conflict in the workplace (Holmes, 2000). The concept of humour is ambiguous. It can be inclusive of jokes and wit, and can be considered from the point of view of the speaker who delivers an utterance intending to amuse, or the hearer who ultimately perceives whether the utterance is amusing or not. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory can explain humour to address the positive face needs for both the speaker and the hearer. Humour may express solidarity, addressing the positive face needs of the listener, or self-depreciation, which concerns the positive face needs of the speaker. However, with a focus on power as a determinant for deferent behaviour and cooperative intent being a central theme, the politeness theory may not effectively account for humour that is used to directly threaten the face of an addressee, or humour that is deliberately used to justify unambiguously aggressive intent, especially in asymmetrical relationships (Holmes, 2000). In conflict situations, humour can be used to mitigate an FTA by expressing concern for the addressee’s face, or it can provide a socially acceptable means for registering a protest, signalling a lack of agreement, or even challenging a superior.

The politeness theory recognises ‘joke’ as a positive politeness strategy, based on the notion of common ground

(shared opinion, attitudes, beliefs, points of view, empathy), and although there is a narrow focus, Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that jokes can attenuate various FTAs and emphasise shared values and beliefs. Holmes (2000) asserts that humour can also be used as a negative politeness strategy “to attenuate the threat to the hearer’s/addressee’s negative face by downtoning or hedging an FTA, such as a directive” (p. 167). In her study on politeness, power and humour in a New Zealand-based workplace, Holmes claims that there were instances where humour was used to mitigate a directive between interlocutors with an unequal power balance.

The Politeness Theory can account for the use of humour in the workplace to create and maintain solidarity through its focus on the speaker’s concern for participant face needs, and it also provides grounds for the use of humour to mitigate the effects of FTAs often found in conflict situations such as directives or criticisms. However, it is unable to offer an explanation for humour used to license intentional face threatening behaviour, especially in relationships where a power imbalance exists (Holmes, 2000). It should also be noted that humour is subjective and does not necessarily translate across cultures. Humour may be seen to attenuate an FTA in one culture but may intensify an FTA in another, so caution should be exercised when using humour to manage conflict in intercultural workplace settings.

Computer-mediated communication

The Politeness Theory can also be applied to written discourse such as computer-mediated communication (CMC). Email has become a pivotal form of communication in workplace settings, particularly in intercultural workplace contexts. Earlier views on email communication saw email as lacking social cues that are prominent in spoken discourse; however, more recent studies have shown that senders of emails display a diverse range of linguistic choices which vary across different social situations (Peterson, Hohensee, & Xia, 2011). FTAs are inevitable in CMC no less than face-to-face (FtF) interactions. Speech acts such as requests, directives and criticisms can all be found in CMC, for example, a request for a file, or arranging a time to meet, and are therefore subject to the politeness conditions contributed by Brown and Levinson. As a matter of interest, there is one type of FTA which is commonly found in FtF communication that is absent from CMC: conversational interruptions (Morand & Ocker, 2003). Morand & Ocker (2003) argue that although interruptions are not present in CMC, ‘interpersonal intrusions’ are facilitated by this form of communication, and are just as potentially dysfunctional or indicative of dominance.

Peterson, Hohensee & Xia (2011) conducted research into whether the three factors proposed in Brown and Levinson’s theory (relative power, social distance and the weight of an imposition) influence formality in emails. Social distance was measured based on the nature of the email content (business or personal) and the number of emails sent from the sender to the receiver. Relative power was determined by the status of the sender in relation to the recipient, and the inclusion of a request or not in the emails determined the weight of imposition. Consistent with Brown and Levinson’s theory, the study showed that emails tended to be more formal (based on Peterson et.al.’s formality classifier) if the email was about a business matter, if it was sent to a recipient of a higher rank, or if it included a request. Interestingly, when the number of recipients exceeded ten, the rate of informality slightly increased. Peterson et.al. suggest that limited dataset or informality as an ‘attention-grabbing’ tactic may be responsible for this result.

In almost any interaction, individuals strive to present a positive self-image (face), and this is evident in CMC by the demonstration of their ability to handle the face of others and adhere to socially (and sometimes culturally) constructed norms, phrasing things in a way to evoke a desired response from other participants, for example (Morand & Ocker, 2003). Based on Brown and Levinson's theory, positive face-threatening acts in CMC could include apologies, humility, excessive emotion and confessions. Positive politeness tactics in CMC, as in FtF communication, attempt to establish common ground between participants. Politeness strategies including jokes, small talk (i.e. 'Hi, it's really busy today, isn't it?') and the use of inclusive forms such as 'we' or 'us' (i.e. 'Where did we leave that agenda?') are easily visible in email communication, and can help mitigate FTAs.

Negative face-threatening acts in CMC can be seen in the form of requests, promises and directives. While positive politeness strategies aim to promote solidarity, negative politeness strategies are used to maintain social distance and formality, which is often a requirement of workplace communication. Evidence of these strategies in CMC can include formal word choices, the use of hedges, grammatical correctness and the use of impersonalised pronouns (Morand & Ocker, 2003).

Research has revealed variation in the use of politeness strategies in cross-cultural computer-mediated communication. In a study by Laura Callahan (2011) a Spanish-speaking supervisor was shown to use fewer mitigators when making requests to subordinates than their English-speaking counterpart. Furthermore, the Spanish-speaker adopted a more frequent use of imperatives in his email requests, which is consistent with other research showing a preference for imperative constructions among Spanish-speakers. Callahan concedes that, based on the politeness theory, this preference can be seen as an 'optimistic' way of performing FTAs such as requests, since imperatives carry a certain optimism that a hearer is willing to carry out the act requested by the speaker, and could therefore be viewed as an indication of positive politeness. Consequently, she concludes that the Spanish-speaker's FTAs were no more face-threatening than his English counterpart's.

Conclusion

Despite the criticism directed at Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, it is important to acknowledge the contributions their model has offered to cross-cultural analyses of politeness. Analysing politeness from the perspective that it is an unpredictable concept that is continually constructed and negotiated through conversation may lead to endless possibilities of language use, however, the politeness theory with its "static, speaker-oriented and speech-act based approach to politeness" has revealed variation in politeness strategy choice across languages and cultures (Ogiermann, 2009, p. 210).

Although the extent to which an utterance is deemed polite is open to interpretation, quantitative research has shown there is a degree of consensus among individuals belonging to a culture about the appropriateness of particular linguistic structures in certain contexts such as the workplace. These assumptions are particularly valuable for individuals communicating in a foreign language, or interacting with members of other cultures in an intercultural environment. Regardless of whether strategies are employed to save face and facilitate politeness, or to conform to divergent cultural norms, their recognition is important to avoid unintentional rudeness and the development of negative cultural stereotypes. As globalisation continues to expand, the need for intercultural communication, especially in the workplace, will inevitably increase, and gaining insight into cross-cultural

differences in communication styles will continue to be an essential component of every intercultural workplace to avoid communication failures (Ogiermann, 2009; Angouri & Locher, 2017).

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