

CLARIFYING THE FUZZY NATURE OF POLITENESS AND POWER: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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***Abstract:** Although the concepts of politeness and power are quite central to social interaction, they have been defined in various ways. This study reviews relevant literature and proposed conceptual schemes, particularly examining the two approaches – linguistic and social – used to examine the concept of politeness and its relationship with power. It notes that politeness can be described as behavior that goes beyond the normal bounds of appropriateness and that what a speaker intends as politeness may not be interpreted as such by a hearer. One central underlying theme in these studies is that, like any social phenomenon, the nature of politeness and power evolve over time and require continuous exploration of their essence.*

***Keywords:** Politeness and power, communication studies, sociolinguistics.*

INTRODUCTION

The study of politeness and its relation to power contributes to research on organizational behavior by giving a clear explanation of the linguistic behavior performed by employees. For example, it focuses on how distinctions in organizational status are revealed through language (Morand, 2000), how power is resisted through language, and how power in language is not limited only to those who hold institutional status.

Language in organizations reveals not only the existence of collegiality but also the enactment of power relationships (Talbot, Atkinson, & Atkinson, 2003; Suhaili, Ahmad & Ainah, 2015). It reflects discursive struggles to maintain identities, fulfill needs, and achieve goals, all of which disclose the exercise of power in organizations. The exercise of power through linguistic interaction is related to power holders' decision to activate or deactivate their possessed power. In other words, the possession of power does not necessarily lead to its enactment through language (Watts, 2003; Blar, Jafar, & Radin Monawir, 2015).

Understanding the complex relationship between politeness and power can deepen our appreciation of the role of language in organizational behavior. For this reason, the present study aims to explore and clarify the concepts of politeness and power and how they interact with each other.

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WHAT IS POLITENESS?

Politeness as a dynamic social norm in workplace communication has attracted sociolinguistic research since the mid-1970s. Previous research has examined politeness and power in communication among different domains and cultures (Alnajjar, 2009; Farhat, 2013; Halbe, 2011; Mullany, 2004; Paramasivam, 2007; Truter, 2008; Yin *et al.*, 2012).

Politeness is a sensitive and controversial concept, and no definition of it is universally accepted. Held (1992) has described this linguistic phenomenon as a “definitionally fuzzy and empirically difficult area” (p. 131). Myriad definitions of politeness have been proposed by researchers in many fields, based on various theories (for a discussion, see Shahrokhi & Bidabadi, 2013).

Researchers have debated two main approaches to interpreting politeness. The first approach defines politeness as a linguistic device, or an abstract and discreet feature of human interaction, and it therefore focuses on the formal features of utterances. The second approach frames politeness in terms of a folk interpretation, as a social device derived from individuals’ evaluation of what constitutes polite or impolite behavior during interaction, and thus focuses discursively on individual’s interpretations of utterances in an ongoing interaction.

The linguistic approach is dominated by the most influential work to date, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory of politeness, which described politeness as a mitigation strategy in response to what they call a face-threatening act. Two other influential researchers who presented a similar interpretation were Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), who shared Brown and Levinson’s definition of politeness as a particular tool used to negotiate relational meaning by determining language choice (as in Locher, 2013). For example, Leech (1983) juxtaposed indirectness with politeness and stated that the more indirect a person is, the more polite that person is perceived to be. These theories investigate only what is considered polite behavior, and by doing so, according to Watts (2003, p. 13), they unintentionally “cloud the issue.”

Watts instead proposed a salient distinction between what he called the *first-order approach to politeness* (the social or discursive approach) and the *second-order approach to politeness* (the linguistic approach). The first-order approach is the common notion of polite behavior as shared by members of a specific society, including the sociocultural and historical factors of that society; the second-order approach is the theoretical one applied in sociolinguistics in an attempt to put forward inherent characteristics of and thereby build a universal linguistic theory of politeness.

Locher (2006, p. 91), working from a discursive perspective, proposed two definitions of politeness, which are open to the individual person’s perceptions:

politeness for the speaker and politeness for the addressee. The former definition (Locher, 2006) states, "A polite utterance is the speaker's intended, marked and appropriate behavior which displays face concern; the motivation for it lies in the possibly, but not necessarily, egocentric desire of the speaker to show positive concern for the addressee and/or to respect the addressee's and the speaker's own need for independence." The latter definition assumes that "Addressees will interpret an utterance as polite when it is perceived as appropriate and marked; the reason for this is understood as the speaker's intention to show positive concern for the addressee's face and/or the speaker's intention to protect his or her own face need."

These paired definitions allow for the possibility of a misunderstanding between the speaker and the hearer during interaction; for instance, what the speaker intends as polite may not be perceived as polite by the hearer, and in some cases it may even be perceived as impolite. Thus, an understanding of politeness must be framed by a prior knowledge of the norms existing in that community, taking into account that these norms are subject to change and negotiation (Locher, 2006).

Seeking to deepen our understanding of politeness and impoliteness, Watts (2003) stated that to understand polite behavior we must first understand what he called *politic behavior*. He defined this politic behavior as acceptable and appropriate behavior based on the social norms related to the context, whereas polite behavior goes beyond the normal bounds of appropriateness and is open to being interpreted negatively (i.e., as over-politeness) or positively by interlocutors. Watts argued that most researchers studying politeness overlook this distinction.

The *first-order approach* enables researchers to consider the discursive context, social norms, and cultural backgrounds of different communities of practice (Harris, 2001; Holmes & Marra, 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2005). These factors can have quite complex impact on what is established as polite in a specific community, usually in accordance with the sociohistorical norms of that community. Holmes et al. (2008) suggested that to interpret this complexity, analysts in a sensitive field of study such as politeness must pay attention to linguistic and non-linguistic interactions, represented by both "the speaker's perceived intention and the hearer's apparent interpretation" (cited in Holmes & Marra, 2011, p. 29).

Holmes and Marra (2011) posited the concept of *situated politeness*, arguing that politeness is dominated by situational norms and constraints that drive participants to use and interpret each utterance according to the norms applied within their community of practice. For instance, in some situations ethnic identity may dominate, whereas in other situations social identity may be pronounced or gender identity may be diminished. These situations might cause individuals to adhere to politeness in negotiating identities. This observation recalls Mills's (2011,

p.73) comment that the study of politeness at the local level (i.e., the community of practice), as opposed to the global level (society in general), “needs to be handled with care.” Mills considered politeness as a set of resources that contain socially derived and locally developed norms exchanged between the local and global levels.

This observation leads to the conclusion that politeness is based on social norms that are accepted, enacted, and developed by individuals in each community of practice. Such a conclusion contradicts the universalism of politeness claimed by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) seminal work and instead describes politeness as based on lay individuals’ judgment. This also explains why the *first-order approach* is more detailed and focused in considering politeness as a social device not separate from its social context.

The combination of both the first- and second-order terminology and methodology enables researchers to look at politeness as a sociocultural and situated phenomenon. Bousfield and Locher (2008) claimed that the combination of both first-order and second-order approaches to politeness can yield more information (cited in Locher, 2013). The former approach presents a detailed system of interpretations of politeness, but neglects the importance of context in shaping these polite linguistic features. The latter approach presents a way of understanding the participants’ utterances within their context.

As Mills (2011) stated, politeness norms do not come from nothing; they are based on linguistic and social resources. Both of these resources may alter social and linguistic struggle to maintain identities. Fairclough (1995), for instance, claimed that in a given context, linguistic features can alter dominance and power. These linguistic features express symbolic power in three ways that can be associated with different levels of polite (or impolite) behavior (Labor, 2011): (1) forceful (non-polite utterances seeking to reach an impolite level); (2) mitigated (non-polite utterances seeking to reach a polite level); and (3) weak (overly polite).

WHAT IS POWER?

Power, from sociological and psychological perspectives, refers to one’s ability to control others and to achieve desired goals. From a social constructivist perspective, it means a fundamental component of social reality that is “observed in language through people’s production, enactment and even resistance to power relationships” (Holmes, 2003). An individual’s social practice of language develops and maintains power. Fairclough (1989), Fowler (1975), and Kramarae, Schulz, and O’Barr (1984) all contended that power is a social and mutual practice experienced during interaction (as cited in Sourgo, 2013).

Power is an interactive concept. How we understand the concept of power shapes how we see, exercise, and maintain power, as well as determining what

we consider legitimate sources of power (Slettebo *et al.*, 2012). As noted by Taylor (2011), many researchers (e.g. Jonson, 2002; Mills, 2003; Thornborrow, 2002) have cautioned against equating institutional and interactional power, arguing that individuals who may lack institutional power tend to use powerful speech in order to claim interactional power.

Watts (2003), also has noted, power is freedom of action and the ability to achieve goals and fulfill needs. It is the ability to influence and change others' behavior and attitudes in a desired way that creates power. Such power, particularly in organizations, derives from multiple bases. It can be described as (1) legitimate power, stemming from a person's position or social status; (2) expert power, based on a person's superior knowledge; (3) referent power, referring to the respect that a person has gained from others (e.g., charismatic power); (4) coercive power, referring to the threatened punishments a person can use against others; and (5) rewarded power, the individual's ability to offer positive incentives to others (Raven, 2008).

POLITENESS AND POWER

Politeness and power are intertwined (Locher, 2006) and are considered "typical interactions in any workplace" (Holmes, 2003, p. 3). For example, politeness is "one of many mechanisms through which the enactment of power might be observed" (Morand, 1991, p.55); in particular, politeness can soften the exercise of power. The main reasons for using politeness to mitigate the display of power are, as Locher (2006) stated, to show consideration for social equilibrium and others' reputations. These considerations help people to negotiate power relations without damaging the "social fabric of communication" (Paramasivam, 2007).

Contrary to the assumption that politeness functions as a face-saving strategy, researchers have shown that some individuals intentionally use politeness strategies to exercise power and attack others (Harris, 2002). In a study of a televised debate between two French presidential candidates, Fracchiolla (2011) found evidence that one candidate's frequent use of politeness strategies was designed to embarrass the other candidate. Moreover, Taylor (2011) described how some people use mock politeness to enact their power; they seem polite, but in fact their intent is to denigrate others (e.g., by the use of the honorific title "Your Majesty" for an ordinary person).

This argument supports Fairclough's (1989) proposal that there exist two types of power enactment, one revealed in language (linguistic power) and another behind language (contextual power). In short, it appears that social phenomenon of politeness and power is not easily interpreted, and to analyze it properly, researchers must take into account the linguistic and contextual features wherein that phenomenon is exercised.

CONCLUSION

Power in organizations arises from varied resources, making it a controversial dimension of organizational structure. Politeness is also considered controversial, not only in organizations but also in society as a whole. The fascinating features of the interrelationship between politeness and power in organizations have stimulated many researchers to track the essence of this interrelationship and explore how it is reflected in employees' behavior. The study of politeness has followed either the linguistic approach, the social approach, or a combination of the two.

The main references (e.g., Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005; Mills, 2011; Watts, 2003) on the topic of politeness have called for further inquiry into individuals' actions so as to obtain a clearer vision of politeness as viewed by its enactors. From these references, it becomes clear that interpretations of the interrelationship of politeness and power are not developed in isolation, but emerge in different ways depending on the approach and perspective selected. A central underlying theme in these studies is that, like any social phenomenon, the nature of politeness and power evolve over time and require continuous exploration of their essence.

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