Importance of Politeness

The concepts of *politeness* is *important* in interpreting *why* people choose to say things in a particular way in spoken or written discourse and *why they choose to:*

- Flout a maxim.
- Expresses an illocutionary act indirectly, rather than directly.
Politeness

❖ Brown and Levinson (1987) talked extensively about politeness. Their basic argument can be summarized as follows:

❖ “When we enter into social relationships we have to acknowledge and show an awareness of face. This is very much reflected in the way we interact with one another.”

❖ Face: The respect one has for herself or himself.
Politeness Strategies

- Politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer’s face.
  - i.e. we usually try to avoid embarrassing the hearer or making him/her feel uncomfortable.

- Universally, we usually respect each other’s expectations regarding self-image; we take account of others’ feelings and avoid Face Threatening Acts (FTAs).
**Face Threatening Acts**

- **Face Threatening Acts**: Acts that infringe on the hearer’s need to maintain her/his self-esteem and to be respected.
  - **Example**: When you ask a classmate to lend you her class-notes, you would be infringing on her exclusive right to her notes.
    - i.e. you would be imposing on her to give you something that is hers.

- Thus, **face threatening acts (FTAs)** are often **unavoidable**.
  - **Speakers** can redress a FTA with **negative politeness** that respects the hearer’s **negative face**. Or they can redress the FTA with **positive politeness**, which respects the hearers’ **positive face**.
Negative Face & Positive Face

- **Negative face:** The person’s desire to be:
  1. **Autonomous** (self-governing)
  2. Free
  3. Not imposed on by others
  4. Respected by others in terms of **time, privacy** and **possession**.

- **Positive face:** The person’s need to be:
  1. Accepted and liked by others
  2. Treated as a **member** of their group.

- In our **interactions** with one another, we are **aware** of our hearers’ **positive** and **negative faces** and we try to **redress** our **FTAs** to **protect** those **faces**.
Examples to Think About

1- “Come on, let’s grab lunch next week!”
2- “I’m wondering if you could join us for lunch next week.”
3- “Could you, please, join us for lunch next week?”
4- “I don’t mean to impose, but I thought, if possible, we could have lunch together next week.”
Example 1

1- “Come on, let’s grab lunch next week!”

- It threatens the negative face because it imposes on the hearer’s time. In this utterance, we give importance to the positive face by showing the hearer that he/she is liked and is a treated like a friend.
Example 2

2- “I’m wondering if you could join us for lunch next week.”

- This utterance shows more awareness of the negative face.
  - i.e. the speaker respects the hearer’s time and does not impose on him/her. However, there is more social distance than there is in example 1 which affects the positive face.
Invitations are face threatening acts because they impose on the time of the hearer that is why they threaten the negative face. The way to invite someone varies according to many factors including the social distance, age, degree of formality, status and role.

This utterance is in the interrogative syntactic structure to give a choice to the hearer.
Example 4

4- “I don’t mean to impose, but I thought, if possible, we could have lunch together next week.”

- This utterance is more formal and more polite and shows awareness of the negative face.
There are four politeness strategies used by people to maintain a balance in protecting the positive and the negative faces of each other and acting appropriately in social interactions.

- Politeness Strategies:
  1. Off-record (Least direct- Most polite)
  2. Negative politeness
  3. Positive politeness
  4. On record baldly (Most direct- Least polite)
Politeness Strategies

• If we view the strategies on a continuous line, it would look like this:

  ![Continuous line diagram]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off-record</th>
<th>Negative Politeness</th>
<th>Positive politeness</th>
<th>On-record boldly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Least direct</td>
<td>Less direct</td>
<td>More direct</td>
<td>Most direct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Polite</td>
<td>Very polite</td>
<td>Less polite</td>
<td>Least polite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Thus, the less direct you are, the more polite you seem to be.
• Conversely, the more blunt in stating your needs in interactions, the less polite you seem to be.
Example

• If you want to borrow your neighbor’s vacuum cleaner, this is how you may ask:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off-Record</th>
<th>Negative politeness</th>
<th>Positive politeness</th>
<th>On-Record baldly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our vacuum cleaner</td>
<td>Could I, please, borrow your vacuum cleaner for just an hour?</td>
<td>Susu, dear, I need to borrow the vacuum cleaner!</td>
<td>Get the vacuum cleaner!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just broke down!</td>
<td>(Still a question to leave an option)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The floors are very dusty!</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you ever find yourself in a situation where you need to borrow your neighbor’s vacuum cleaner you may use these strategies but each is appropriate in its own context.
Example on the off-record strategy:

“Our vacuum cleaner just broke down! The floors are very dusty!”

• **When would you use such a strategy?**
  – You are not that familiar with your neighbor, or you know that she is the type who does not like lending her appliances.

• **In this context:**
  • No mention of an act to be requested: You do not state that you want to borrow the vacuum cleaner explicitly.
  • The need is only hinted, not mentioned: By hinting it, you are being very respectful of your neighbor’s autonomy.
    • i.e. you are giving her the option of not taking the hint, and pretending she did not understand you!

• **Why is this strategy considered the most polite? Why is it the least threatening of all strategies to the hearer’s negative face?**
  – Because it respects the hearer’s possession and right to be autonomous and not imposed on by others.
2- Negative Politeness

Example on the negative politeness strategy:

“Could I, please, borrow your vacuum cleaner for just an hour?”

• **When would you use such a strategy?**
  – You still want to maintain distance from your neighbour, observing her right to her possession (i.e. her vacuum cleaner), so you express that you want to borrow it from her, but you do so in the form of: a yes/no question to give her the option.
    • So, you may be more familiar with your neighbor here, but you are still not that close

• **In this context:**
  • The **act** is mentioned explicitly: “borrow your vacuum cleaner”
  • Using a **yes – or – no question** to give an option to the hearer acknowledging her right to her possession.
  • using ‘**could**’ which expresses the **remote possibility** of her allowing this to happen;
  • Using ‘please’ to be more polite
  • Using the **possessive** determiner ‘**your**’
  • Using the prepositional **time phrase** ‘for just an hour’ to **minimize** the **imposition**.
3- Positive Politeness

Example on the positive politeness strategy:
“Susu, dear, I need the vacuum cleaner right away!”

- When would you use such a strategy?
  - When there is less social distance between the speaker and the hearer; they are close to each other (friends).

- In this context:
  - The act is mentioned explicitly and directly: “I need the vacuum cleaner”
  - Linguistic features that show closeness:
    - Using a nickname addressing the hearer: “Susu”
    - Using an endearment term: “dear”
  - Using the definite article “the” instead of “your”
  - The time expression “right away”

- Given the relationship between the speaker and hearer, how would the hearer feel if negative politeness was used instead?
  - The hearer would feel like a stranger because the speaker is infringing on her positive face, i.e. her right to be liked and part of a group (a friend)
4- On-Record Baldly

Example on the on-record baldly strategy:
“Bring me the vacuum cleaner!”

• When would you use such a strategy?
  – It sounds very impolite, but there are contexts in which it is the only appropriate strategy such as very close sister.

• In this context:
  • The act is **mentioned explicitly** and **bluntly**: “bring me the vacuum” cleaner”
  • Using the **imperative** syntactic structure (**direct directive**): “bring me”
  • Using the **definite article** “the” instead of “your”
  • No time specified.
EXERCISES
Notes

- The extent of **option-giving influences** the degree of **politeness**.
  - The **greater option** you give to your hearer to say ‘no’, the **more polite** your utterance is.
  - **Example:**
    - “I couldn’t borrow $30, could I?” is more polite than “Could I borrow $30?” and even more polite than “Lend me 30$.”.
Appropriateness & Politeness Strategies

The context of the utterance decides which of the four strategies is more appropriate.
Appropriateness – Off-Record Strategy

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The **speaker** is **not** that **familiar** with **hearer**.
  - So the **speaker** gives the **hearer** the **option** of not taking the hint, and pretending she/he did not understand.
  - By hinting the need, the **speaker** is being very respectful of your **hearer’s autonomy**, i.e. **negative face**.

- There is **social distance** between **speaker** and **hearer**.
  - Including **differences** in **age**, **status**, **role**, [**gender**]...etc.

- **Imposition** is **great**.
Appropriateness – Negative Politeness

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The speaker still wants to maintain distance from the hearer.
- The speaker may be more familiar with the hearer but still NOT that close.
Appropriateness – Positive Politeness

This strategy is appropriate when:

- The *speaker* and the *hearer* are close friends.
- *Imposition* is *small*.
This strategy is appropriate when:

- The speaker has **authority** over the hearer either by being **higher in status** or has a more **dominant role**.
- The speaker is in a **hurry**.
- It is an **emergency** situation.
- Imposition is **small**.
FTA’s

- **Face threatening acts**: Acts that infringe on the hearer’s need to maintain her/his self-esteem and to be respected.
  - i.e. acts that threaten either the **negative** or the **positive** face of hearer.

**Remember that:**

- **Negative face**: The person’s desire to be **autonomous**, **free**, **not imposed on** by others and **respected** by others in terms of **time**, **privacy** and **possession**.
- **Positive face**: The person’s need to be accepted and liked by others and **Treated as a member of their group**.
- **FTA’s** are sometimes **unavoidable**, but **speakers** usually **redress** their **FTA’s** through the various **politeness strategies**.
Examples of FTAs to the **Negative** Face

1. A **demand** for an action.

2. A **request** to:
   
   I. **Borrow** from the hearer
   II. **Take** something from hearer
   III. **Occupy** the hearer’s **time** *(e.g. invitations)*

3. **Personal questions.**
Examples of FTAs to the Positive Face

1. Rejecting an invitation.
2. Disagreeing with the hearer.
3. Refusing a proposal.
4. Criticising the hearer.
Exercises

1. Husband to wife:
   “Honey, I am wearing the last clean shirt I found in the closet!”
   Politeness strategy: ___________
   Maxim flouted:_____________
   Speech act:______________

2. A college dean to an applicant for a job at the college:
   “You might be happier at a smaller –or a larger- college, son!”
   Politeness strategy: __________
   Maxim flouted:_____________
   Speech act:______________
Answers

- **In the first example,** asking the wife to wash the shirts is threatening to her negative face, so the husband redresses the act by using off-record politeness strategy. He also flouts the maxim of manner and uses an indirect directive.

- **In the second example,** rejecting the applicant is threatening to his positive face, so the dean redresses the act through the use of off-record politeness strategy. He also flouts the maxims of manner, quality, and quantity, and uses an indirect speech act of rejecting.
Context and the Choice of Politeness Strategies

People choose the appropriate politeness strategy based on the context as follows:

1- Situational Context:
   I. Size of imposition: The greater the imposition the more polite (indirect) the strategy.
   II. Setting of the interaction: The more formal the setting, the more polite the strategy.

2- Social Context:
   I. Social distance: The greater the social distance, the more polite (indirect) the strategy.
      - Social distance increases or decreases according to:
        a. Degree of familiarity (how well and how long have you known each other)
        b. Differences of status (e.g. boss, employee)
        c. Roles (teacher/students, parent/child)
        d. Age
        e. Gender
        f. Education
        g. Social class
   II. Power relations: Differences of status, age, role, gender, education, and social class give speakers power and authority. Power and authority can be expressed through the linguistic choices a speaker makes. In terms of politeness, those who possess power can be more direct and blunt
      - i.e. less polite (towards the right of the continuum), and vice versa.