

A Dispute Over Politeness

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Abstract

This paper attempts to overview the politeness theories so far and to consider the validity of each claim. Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) politeness theory has given a great impact on politeness research, and many studies have been conducted following that. After some time later, some criticisms toward Brown and Levinson's theory were made. And after that, some counterarguments toward those criticisms were made. Concerning Brown and Levinson's theory, there is a dispute – for or against Brown and Levinson. This paper aims to clarify each standpoint and to give some useful insight into politeness research.

1. Introduction

The notion of politeness as a common sense has been widely spread, but it can be said that the scholarly concept of politeness¹ has begun with Lakoff (1973), who adopted Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, and defined politeness as "... a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange" (Lakoff, 1990: 34). Leech (1983) also elaborated Grice's Cooperative Principle, and his politeness theory situated politeness with a framework of "interpersonal rhetoric". What Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987) differed from them was that Brown and Levinson saw politeness in terms of conflict avoidance (See section 2). Fraser (1975; 1990) and Fraser and Nolen (1981) had their own idea, presenting the "conversational-contract view". According to Fraser (1990: 232), upon entering into a given conversation, each party brings as an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary states, what the participants can expect from the other(s). This interpersonal contract is not static, but it can be revised during the course of time, or because of a change in the context, there is always the possibility for a renegotiation of the conversational contract: the two parties may readjust just what rights and what obligations they hold towards each other.

Among these politeness theories, the one by Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987) has been most influential. Eelen (2001: 3) actually states that "The names Brown & Levinson have become almost synonymous with the word 'politeness' itself...". Thus, many studies have been conducted based on their theory so far. However, Brown and Levinson's theory has

been much criticised especially by Asian scholars (Matsumoto, 1988; Matsumoto, 1989; Ide, 1989; Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994). Recently, several researchers have counterargued against those criticisms (e.g., Fukushima, 2000; Ji, 2000; Usami, 2002; Pizziconi, 2003). And in reply to Pizziconi, Matsumoto (2003) has tried to defend herself and argued that Pizziconi has misinterpreted her. In sum, after almost three decades since the publication of Brown and Levinson's theory, there are some eras in politeness theory: (1) Brown and Levinson have published their politeness theory and many researchers have followed that; (2) some researchers have criticised Brown and Levinson's theory; and (3) some other researchers have counterargued those criticisms. Although it cannot be called an era, as there is only one counterargument and it was just published, Matsumoto (2003) has counterargued Pizziconi's (2003) criticism toward her articles (1988; 1989). If some more researchers in the second era counterargue the criticisms made toward their claims, this will be the fourth era.

In this paper, I will review the following: (1) Brown and Levinson's theory in section 2; (2) the criticisms toward Brown and Levinson's theory in section 3; (3) the counterarguments toward those criticisms in section 4 and (4) Matsumoto's reply to Pizziconi in section 5. Ji (2000) has counterargued against Chinese criticisms, however, there is no other counterargument toward Chinese criticisms. Most counterarguments were made by Japanese researchers. Therefore, in this paper I will confine myself to the criticisms made by Japanese researchers and counterarguments by the Japanese. I will attempt to consider politeness from the Japanese perspective, as well as investigating whether Brown and Levinson's theory can apply to Japanese language or culture.

2. Brown and Levinson's theory

The main features of Brown and Levinson's (1978; 1987) politeness theory are rationality and face, which are both claimed to be universal. Rationality is a means-ends reasoning or logic, and face consists of two wants. They have postulated a universal Model Person (MP), and proposed the two kinds of face: positive and negative. They have introduced the notion of face-threatening acts (FTAs), having postulated five strategies to avoid or minimise FTAs. They have argued that some variables are important to determine the strategies. I will explain their theory more in detail.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 58) have postulated a Model Person (MP), who is endowed with properties of rationality and face, and they have claimed that:

All our Model Person (MP) consists in is a wilful fluent speaker of a natural language, further endowed with two special properties — rationality and face. By 'rationality' we mean something very specific — the availability to our MP of a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve

those ends. By 'face' we mean something quite specific again: our MP is endowed with two particular wants – roughly the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects.

They have termed the former want as negative face, and the latter as positive face. They have maintained that the notion of face constituted by these two face wants was universal, admitting that the content of face is culture-specific and subjects to much cultural elaboration (1987: 13).

They (Ibid.: 65) further claim that:

Given these assumptions of the universality of face and rationality, it is intuitively the case that certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker.

They call the acts to threaten face "face threatening acts" (FTAs). They claim that most speech acts inherently threaten either the hearer's or the speaker's face-wants, and that politeness is involved in redressing those face-threats. In order to redress those face-threats, they have postulated the strategies. They have first divided the strategies into two: (1) Do the FTA and (2) Don't do the FTA. Among the strategies to do the FTA, they have classified them into two: (1) on record and (2) off record. The strategies which belong to on record are: (1) without redressive action, baldly and (2) with redressive action. There are two subcategories to the strategies with redressive action: (1) positive politeness and (2) negative politeness. Therefore, there are five strategies: (1) without redressive action, baldly; (2) positive politeness; (3) negative politeness; (4) off-record and (5) Don't do the FTA.

In order to determine the above strategies, they (1987: 74) have claimed that the following variables are involved in many and perhaps all cultures:

- (1) the social distance (D) of S and H (a symmetric relation);
- (2) the relative power (P) of S and H (an asymmetric relation); and
- (3) the absolute ranking (R) of imposition in the particular culture.

In the next section, I will review the criticisms toward Brown and Levinson's theory.

3. Japanese Criticisms

As stated in section 1, I will focus on the criticisms made by Japanese researchers, although

several other researchers (e.g., Gu, 1990 and Mao, 1994 from the Chinese perspective; Nwoye, 1992 from Nigerian Igbo society; Bayaktaroglu, 2000 from Turkish society; and Mursy and Wilson, 2001 from Egyptian Arabic society) have also criticised Brown and Levinson's theory from the viewpoint of their own cultural backgrounds.

Concerning Brown and Levinson's theory, the notion of face and that of universality have been most criticised. Matsumoto (1988: 1989) and Ide (1989) have attacked their theory from the Japanese perspective. Matsumoto (1988) claims that the Japanese notion of face is different from Brown and Levinson's. She (Ibid.: 405) maintains that the notion of negative face wants as the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions is inappropriate for Japanese culture. What is important for a Japanese is understanding where s/he stands in relation to other members of the group or society, and acknowledging his/her dependence on others. The Japanese politeness system places a higher value on recognition of the interpersonal relation than on mitigating impositions on freedom of action (Ibid.: 421). Pizziconi (2003: 1475) summarises Matsumoto's claim as "... in Japanese, the ability to give or obtain face by linguistic means allegedly depends on knowledge of social norms rather than skilful redress of FTAs." As an example of non-FTA utterances, Matsumoto (1988: 415) shows that it is possible in Japanese to use the three different copulas to express "Today is Saturday".

Matsumoto (Ibid.) further gives the following examples to show that social norms, not redress of FTAs, which determine linguistic choices in Japanese : (1) formulaic expressions (e.g., *Doozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu.* (lit) 'I ask you to please treat me well/take care of me. '); (2) honorifics (e.g., different ways of expressing 'eat' according to the subject) as to show "a reflection of rank-ordering" (Matsumoto, 1988: 414); and (3) the verbs of giving and receiving. Matsumoto (Ibid.: 421) states that "the Japanese politeness system places a higher value on recognition of the interpersonal relation than on mitigating impositions on freedom of action".

She also argues that the concept of imposition in Japanese culture is different from the one proposed by Brown and Levinson. The imposition on the addressee is the one in which the speaker expresses deference by humbling him- or herself and placing him- or herself in a lower position (Matsumoto, 1988: 410), i.e., enhancing the good self-image of the addressee.

In sum, Matsumoto (1989) claims that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness fails in Japanese, because the postulated motivation underlying politeness phenomena seems unsuited to Japanese culture and language. In Japanese, honorifics are obligatory, even in the absence of FTAs.

Ide's (1989) main argument is that of Discernment, or *wakimae*. She distinguishes Volition from Discernment, the former involving verbal strategies to attain some individual and

personal goals, the latter consisting in socially obligatory verbal (grammatical) choices. Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki and Ogino (1986) claim that Volition is predominant in American English, whereas Discernment is prominent in Japanese. Ide (1989) uses the Japanese term, *wakimae*, which can be defined as the practice of polite behavior according to social conventions (Ibid: 230), interchangeably with Discernment, and claims that this is the neglected aspect in Brown and Levinson's theory. She (Ibid.: 230) further states that "To behave according to *wakimae* is to show verbally one's sense of place or role in a given situation according to social conventions". That is, speakers use polite expressions according to social conventions rather than interactional strategy. Ide (Ibid.) argues that Brown and Levinson's claim for the universality of politeness principles is questionable from aspects of language and usage which are distinctly relevant to linguistic politeness in Japanese.

What Matsumoto and Ide maintain have some common points. First, the claim by Matsumoto (1989), i.e., in Japanese, honorifics are obligatory even in the absence of FTAs, is shared by Ide's (1989) claim of the formal linguistic forms among varieties with different degree of formality. Second, what Matsumoto (1989) claims as important for a Japanese, i.e., understanding where s/he stands in relation to other members of the group or society, seems to be similar to *wakimae* claimed by Ide (1989). Ide did not refer to the claim made by Matsumoto (1988), i.e., the concept of imposition in Japanese culture is different from the one proposed by Brown and Levinson. In the next section, these criticisms will be examined.

4. Counterarguments toward the Criticisms

The criticisms made toward Brown and Levinson by Japanese researchers in section 3 can be summarised in the following three points: (1) linguistic choices in Japanese, (2) *wakimae* and (3) the concept of imposition. In this section, I will consider these points, and also consider positive politeness, which Japanese researchers have not mentioned when they criticised Brown and Levinson's theory.

The first point is that some linguistic choices in Japanese are grammatically obligatory, and in Japanese linguistic choices are made even in the absence of an FTA (e.g. "Today is Saturday."). However, this is just a sociolinguistic aspect of Japanese language, and this does not amount to refute Brown and Levinson's theory. Thomas (1995: 152) points out that it is not significant pragmatically, if the use of a particular form is obligatory in a particular situation. Pizziconi (2003: 1488-1489) claims that honorifics and verbal strategies are not very different in the sense that they are anchored in rank- or role-related general norms and expectations, and that criteria of social and situational appropriateness apply equally to any device. The only difference is that formal forms are conspicuous, non-propositional and more conventionally bound to global elements and that they tend to be perceived as

relatively more stable than norms that regulate the choice of any appropriate verbal strategy.

Concerning the claim by Matsumoto (1989), Usami (2002: 21) counters, stating that:

Matsumoto seems to consider the FTA of the utterance “Today is Saturday,” only from the perspective of its propositional meaning at the sentence level. ... This utterance, however, like any other, can express a different FTA depending on various social contexts. ... Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory can also account for the choice of politeness level of Japanese speakers when they utter “Today is Saturday,” depending on the context of actual settings.

Usami (*Ibid.*: 23) summarises that they confuse “politeness theory” in pragmatic language use with the choice of politeness level of linguistic forms. In other words, they confound politeness and deference, as well as politeness theory and principles of honorific use in specific languages having honorific systems.

The second point is the claim by Ide (1989) and Hill et al. (1986) which distinguishes Volition from Discernment, and claims that only Discernment is important in Japanese and Volition, which involves strategies to redress FTAs, does not apply to Japanese. Ide (1989) uses the Japanese term, *wakimae*, to mean Discernment and gave an impression that it is something unique to Japanese society, but in every society, people act according to *wakimae*. I believe that this is similar to what Matsumoto (1988) claimed. That is, they understand where s/he stands in relation to other members of the society or the group. *Wakimae* literally means to follow reason and act according to the reasonable judgement. This is not the prerogative of Japanese society. I claim that it applies universally, although there may be differences in the norms of each society, or the degree to which one may have to conform to those norms. People decide behaviours, including the use of politeness strategies, according to their judgement of their position. The judgement of their position is included in consideration of a situation. If people fail to judge their position and cannot take the appropriate behaviour, they receive some kind of social sanctions, for example, having the ill reputation. Pizziconi (2003: 1500) also claims that the need of *wakimae* (discernment) is vital in communication regardless of the language.

The third point is that the concept of imposition in Japanese culture is different from that by Brown and Levinson. Matsumoto (1989) claims that the concept of imposition in Japanese culture even enhances the good self-image (that is, the ‘face’) of the addressee. Since the concept of imposition as defined by Brown and Levinson is considered to be something to be avoided, the concept of imposition in Japanese society is different from that by Brown and Levinson. However, this point can be counterargued by the multifunctionality of utterances, as suggested by Turner (1996), who cites an example, “Could you look after the baby for half an hour?” and considers the multifunctionality of the utterance, such as threatening the

addressee's negative face, undermining the speaker's positive face, and anointing the addressee's positive face. Anointing the addressee's positive face (because the speaker is selecting the addressee as a reliable and responsible person to undertake this particular important task) seems to be similar to the concept of imposition in Japanese culture claimed by Matsumoto. Thus, enhancing the face of the addressee is not unique to Japanese culture.

Pizziconi (2003: 1497) claims that the Japanese data do not provide evidence that this language behaves any differently from those treated by Brown and Levinson and that the claim by Matsumoto concerning the imposition is not valid, stating that:

Unless one can prove that impositions on the hearer typically convey politeness (and the evidence discussed by Matsumoto does not), or that disregard for the hearer's attributes and wants does not cause disruptions to the relationship, then B&L's rationale is not invalidated.

From the above, it is clear that the Japanese researchers' criticisms toward Brown and Levinson's politeness theory are not relevant.

Next, I would like to turn to positive politeness, one of the important concepts of Brown and Levinson's theory. When claiming that Brown and Levinson's theory does not apply to the Japanese, neither Matsumoto nor Ide has mentioned positive face and positive politeness strategies, which makes their criticism toward Brown and Levinson inadequate. Pizziconi (2003) has also pointed this out. She states that "It is indeed unfortunate that their papers have not proposed much consideration of, nor prompted further discussion on, the role of positive politeness in human communication; ..." (Ibid.: 1473) and that "... their total rejection of B&L's notions of face, whilst on one hand allowing the development of a notion of appropriateness, has prevented Ide and Matsumoto from paying attention to the role of positive strategies in the construction of such appropriateness" (Ibid.: 1480). Underspecificatin of positive face in politeness research was also pointed out by Spencer-Oatey (2000: 13).

Usami (2002) also maintains that positive politeness applies to Japanese language. She (Ibid.: 225-226) also criticises traditional Japanese linguists (Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988), who have equated politeness with the use of honorifics as the speaker's choice of linguistic form at the sentence level, and who have criticised Brown and Levinson's theory by pointing out that this theory fails to fully consider politeness in languages with honorifics, i.e., language usage that is socio-pragmatically constrained and governed by obligatory honorific principles rather than consisting of voluntary strategies. According to the results by Usami, options do exist for the voluntary use of strategic speech-level shifts in Japanese, and the appropriate use of speech-level shifts from the polite or super-polite to the non-polite form

serves as an indicator of positive politeness, as described in Brown and Levinson's theory.

Matsumoto and Ide tried to attack Brown and Levinson's theory from the viewpoint that it cannot apply to Japanese language, however, as Nishihara (2002: 103) admits, the results of Fukushima (2000) show that Brown and Levinson's theory can apply also to Japanese language, in the sense that politeness is a universal behaviour which is weighted by power, social distance and the rate of imposition.

In sum, the examination of the criticisms toward Brown and Levinson's politeness theory from Matsumoto and Ide showed that their criticisms did not refute Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. Usami's following statement summarises the evaluation of the argument by Matsumoto and Ide. "I ... perceive these criticisms to be a result of inadequate interpretation of the theory and that considerable confusion in the field has arisen as a result" (Usami, 2002: 19).

5. Matsumoto (2003)

In this section, only Matsumoto's (2003) reply to Pizziconi (2003) is discussed, as only Matsumoto has made some comments on the counterarguments summarised in section 4.

Matsumoto (2003: 1515) states that Pizziconi misapprehends both the substance and the intent of her arguments. Matsumoto (2003: 1516-1517) counterargues against Pizziconi's (2003) criticisms, especially on universality, stating that:

In light of the primary concerns of my study, it was a disappointment to read Pizziconi's repeated criticism, as in the statement in p.3 (ms.): "What makes Ide's and Matsumoto's claim unconvincing is precisely the assertion that these regulating principles are only locally valid, in other words, the rejection of any notion of universality."

Matsumoto argues that her position in her 1988 paper was, in fact, to the contrary.

Matsumoto (2003: 1516) made herself clear, stating that she had no objection to Brown and Levinson's idea that speakers use "rationality" to choose "linguistic strategies" for face-preserving purposes, but what she objected to was their claim that 'face' could be reduced to a two-dimensional model of 'negative face' and 'positive face'. She (Ibid.: 1517) maintains that she questioned the efficacy of employing what appeared to be an English folk concept in a universal account of linguistic politeness.

In order to illustrate her concern, Matsumoto (1988) chose Japanese. She called three

commonly used linguistic constructions in Japanese (formulaic expressions, honorifics and verbs of giving and receiving) “relation-acknowledgement devices”. By using these expressions, interlocutors acknowledge their understanding of the relationships among one another in the speech context, and thereby satisfy ‘face’-related wants that do not readily fit within the categories of ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’ as specifically defined by Brown and Levinson.

Matsumoto (2003: 1518) further states that since the decision to use a certain relation-acknowledgement device lies with the speaker, the choice is not socially predetermined, although adult speakers may well share some general knowledge of expected behavior. Thus, Matsumoto characterises the use of a formulaic expression as a rationally chosen strategy. Matsumoto (2003: 1518-1519) insists that she never said honorific forms are “pragmatically obligatory choices”, as Pizziconi (2003) criticises, however, Matsumoto argues that the choice of predicate forms is syntactically obligatory.

6. Conclusion

In this section, I will try to evaluate the criticisms and counterarguments in section 3 and section 4 respectively, as well as Matsumoto’s (2003) counterargument in section 5.

What I think Matsumoto (2003) rightly counterargued against Pizziconi (2003) was that Matsumoto never stated that the honorific forms and the choice of predicate forms are pragmatically obligatory, but she just stated that they are syntactically obligatory. I think Pizziconi has misunderstood Matsumoto in this respect.

However, I cannot understand Matsumoto’s following argument. She (2003: 1518) claims that the choice of relation-acknowledgement device is not socially predetermined, despite the fact that adult speakers may well share some general knowledge of expected behaviour. She argues, therefore, that the use of a formulaic expression can be characterised as a rationally chosen strategy. While Matsumoto (2003: 1519) claims that the choice of relation-acknowledgement devices is syntactically obligatory, she maintains that the use of a certain relation-acknowledgement device is a rationally chosen strategy. I do not think that she has fully explained why a certain relation-acknowledgement device is a rationally chosen strategy. In a similar way, I do not think Matsumoto has clearly explained in her earlier work (1988) that she has not objected to Brown and Levinson’s universality, but she has objected only to the two-dimensional model of face by Brown and Levinson. As stated in section 3, she has claimed that the negative face does not fit to Japanese language and culture, giving the impression that she objects to the concept of universality proposed by Brown and Levinson. As she (2003: 1519) herself admits, she could have explained her contention more accurately.

I find it rather disappointing to see that only Matsumoto (2003) made some comments on the counterarguments. Since several researchers have already questioned the validity of the criticisms by Matsumoto and Ide toward Brown and Levinson, it is time for Matsumoto and Ide to make some comments. Matsumoto (2003) tried to defend herself against Pizziconi's (2003) criticism, but she has not made any comments on other counterarguments summarised in section 4. And Matsumoto has not counterargued against Pizziconi's all the criticisms. For example, Matsumoto has not mentioned anything on the concept of imposition in Japan, which she claimed to be different from that by Brown and Levinson. Ide has not at all presented her view on the counterarguments toward her criticism. Therefore, it can be said that the counterarguments toward Matsumoto and Ide are still valid. I feel that a dispute over politeness has not ended yet. One solution may be that the researchers who criticised Brown and Levinson's theory, not only the Japanese but also other researchers (although this paper was confined to the Japanese researchers), will consider the counterarguments toward their criticisms seriously, contemplate their claims again and make their standpoint clear.

Note

¹ See Fukushima (2003) and Watts (2003: 9-12 and 30-32) for the distinction between first-order-politeness and second-order-politeness.

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