Chapter 9. POLITENESS

Adapted from Chapter 5 (“Being Polite as a Variable of Speech”) of *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, by Miriam Meyerhoff.

INTRODUCTION

'I'll have an iced mocha,' said Ellen, my friend from New York.

'An iced mocha,' repeated the waitress. 'Do you want whipped cream on that?'

'You have to ask?' said Ellen.

Politeness is a strange thing. Clearly the waitress at this restaurant in Michigan found Ellen’s reply, ‘You have to ask?’ and her ironic tone of voice, somewhat hard to interpret. There was a long pause while she looked at Ellen, waiting for her to say something more. When Ellen said nothing and continued looking at the menu, the waitress finally looked at me. I raised my eyebrows and smiled slightly, and the waitress wrote the drink order on her notepad. In New York, Ellen’s answer means an enthusiastic ‘yes’. In Michigan, it seems waitresses don’t expect the kind of ironic jokes from strangers that you might find in talk between close friends.

Was it polite for Ellen to say ‘You have to ask?’ like that? Your answer probably depends on where you grew up and what norms of politeness you acquired there. In many places, a reply like this would be considered terribly rude, and something like ‘Yes, please’ or ‘Yes, thank you’ would be expected. But by the standards of where Ellen grew up, she was being polite. By making a joke – moreover, a joke that suggests that the answer to her question is already shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer – she was working to make the business exchange feel more friendly.

As we will see in the discussion of speech levels in the next chapter, some languages even have different words for the same thing that have to be chosen depending on what the politeness and respect relationship is between the speakers. In Japanese, the form of some verbs, including the verb ‘to eat’, changes entirely, as you can see in the following example (the root form for ‘eat’ is underlined in each sentence):

(1) Tanaka: Sensei, keeki *meshiagari*-mas-u-ka?

Teacher cake eat-polite-non.past-Q

‘Teacher, would you like some cake?’

Professor: Ee, *tabe*-mas-u. Tanaka-san wa?

Yes, eat-polite-non.past. Tanaka-san TOPIC

‘Yes, I’ll have some. Will you, Tanaka?’


Yes eat-polite-non.past. Thanks.

‘Yes, I’ll have some. Thank you.’ (Adapted from Tsujimura 1996)

Here the student, Tanaka, uses the honorific form for ‘eat’ in his question. It is called an honorific form because it is used to show respect for the person who is (or will be) eating. The professor replies with the unmarked form (i.e., it makes no claims one way or another about the status of the person eating), and then Tanaka answers him using the form for ‘eat’ that indicates that Tanaka humbles himself with respect to his professor.

As you can see, regardless of which form of ‘eat’ they use, both Tanaka and his professor add a polite suffix (-mas) on the verb, and the professor uses the respectful suffix -san when addressing Tanaka. Japanese requires speakers to make such decisions about what verb form to use, and what kind of suffixes to attach to verbs and nouns in everyday speech. Showing this kind of attention to each other and evaluating your relationship with your addressees in a particular place or at a particular time is, in a very general sense, what it means to be polite.
In this chapter we will look at the phenomenon of politeness, focusing on one framework for analysing different forms and levels of politeness. We will explore the usefulness of distinguishing between the politeness that we use among friends and with people we are less familiar with. This distinction will be useful because the kind of attention close friends pay to each other and the nature of our long-term relationships with each other are very different from the kind of attention we have been taught to pay to people with whom we have more limited relationships and with whom we are less well acquainted. This chapter will show how different forms of politeness attend to different social needs, and we will illustrate this by looking at examples of the different forms that requests and apologies can take. We will then consider the way in which frameworks of politeness have been applied to other fields, such as workplace interaction and intercultural communication. The chapter also considers some criticism of the most commonly used theory of politeness, and highlights some of the directions in which the criticism might help to advance work on politeness in the future.

THEORIES OF POLITENESS

There are a number of different ways in which linguists can analyze politeness. The various approaches differ primarily in whether they emphasize the speaker or the addressee, and whether they emphasize accounting for polite behaviour or impolite behaviour. Most of the theories proposed to account for politeness that are accessible to readers of English or other European languages have made the speaker central to the analysis rather than the addressee. Although they have tried to take into account the relationship between speaker and hearer, this has been limited by the focus on the speaker planning and evaluating his or her next move in a conversation. More recently, work by Japanese, Chinese, African and Middle Eastern scholars has begun to make more of an impact on the field of politeness studies. As a general rule, most of these researchers have emphasized the importance of seeing politeness and impoliteness as acts which involve consideration of the addressee’s wants and desires as well as the speaker’s own, and acts that involve consideration of the larger social group in which both the speaker and addressee have grown up and been socialized.

It is impossible in an introductory text to do justice to the range of perspectives that linguists and anthropologists have on politeness. Instead, I will introduce one major framework: Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson’s Politeness Theory, and discuss this in more detail. Their framework is, without doubt, the most widely known and extensively used approach to the study of politeness. Its position in the field is so dominant that researchers who want to propose alternative treatments of politeness are obliged to state how and why they think their framework is better than Brown and Levinson’s. So it is impossible to talk about politeness or to read most of the research that has been undertaken on politeness since the 1970s without understanding the basic principles of Brown and Levinson’s theory.

Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory

In Brown and Levinson’s framework for analyzing politeness, it is important to realize that both a humble response and a joking response (as with Ellen’s reply asking for whipped cream on her coffee) can be analyzed as forms of politeness. Most people associate ‘politeness’ just with ways of speaking that avoid causing offence by showing deference to another person. But Brown and Levinson point out that in any speech community, there are some contexts in which deference would be inappropriate. Instead, comments that point to group membership may be what avoids causing offence in an interaction. If Ellen had replied ‘Well, if it’s not too much trouble, I would be terribly grateful’, such extreme deference would have sounded strange, and perhaps even been interpreted as snobbish or sarcastic. In other words, under these circumstances, showing lots of deference would have seemed impolite and rude.

Brown and Levinson’s goal was to provide a framework for analyzing politeness that could accommodate considerations like this, and that might also provide a basis for discussing similarities and differences between cultures in how politeness works.
Positive and negative politeness: positive and negative face

Brown and Levinson’s theory distinguishes between two types of politeness. The strategies that avoid offence by showing deference are called **negative politeness strategies** and the strategies that avoid offence by highlighting friendliness are called **positive politeness strategies**. They also suggest that whether we consider a strategy polite or impolite depends on how much attention or what kind of attention a speaker pays to their own and their addressee’s **face wants**.

This technical use of the term ‘face’ is very similar to the way the word is used in many varieties of English. If, for example, someone comes to a meeting unprepared and everyone notices their lack of preparation, you could say that person had ‘lost face’. Similarly, if I do something embarrassing in public, and you distract people or say something to minimise the seriousness of what I did, you could say that you had helped me ‘save face’.

The notion of ‘face’ as a term in sociolinguistics can be traced back to work by the sociologist Erving Goffman. In Goffman’s work, ‘face’ was a personal attribute or quality that each of us works to protect or enhance. However, face is something that we only possess if it is recognised or granted to us by others in our community. Brown and Levinson narrowed this down somewhat, and their definition of ‘face’ emphasises less the interpersonal and communal nature of face wants. They propose that we want to guard our face against possible damage when we interact with others. The reason that there are two types of politeness – positive and negative politeness – is because we are concerned with maintaining two distinct kinds of face:

- **Negative face**: every competent adult member of a community wants their actions to be unimpeded by others.
- **Positive face**: everyone would like their wants be desirable to at least some other people.
(Brown and Levinson 1987: 62)

Notice that face wants are something that ‘competent adults’ in a community have. In other words, we have to learn or acquire what we come to think of as our negative and positive face wants.

In societies where interactions between strangers are conventionally focused more on deferential behavior (that is, paying more attention to negative face wants), it seems very rude to ignore the distance there might be between you and your addressee and to talk as if you know her or him better than you do. Europeans usually think that in Asian societies, social conventions require Asian speakers to pay more attention to the hearer’s negative face wants than, say, French society requires French speakers to. And in example (1) we saw some examples of the way Japanese speakers are required to show respect to their addressees. These include the use of honorific address forms, humbling forms of the verb, and suffixes indicating politeness. These are all particularly noticeable to Western learners of the language and quite hard to master well. However, even within Europe, some speech communities are stereotyped as being more deference-oriented than others, e.g., the idea that Germans are more ‘stand-offish’ and Italians are more ‘friendly’.

In Japan, students would usually address a university professor by his or her last name and then they will add the honorific suffix -sensei (meaning ‘teacher’). By emphasising the social distance between the student and the professor, it attends to both parties’ negative face wants. The situation in Germany is analogous. There, students and more junior faculty members almost invariably address university professors by their full professional titles. This means that if you are addressing a full professor who has more than one Ph.D., you are expected to use all those titles when you greet them: *Guten Tag, Frau Professor Doktor Doktor Nussbaum* (‘Good afternoon, Ms Professor, Doctor, Doctor Nussbaum”).

Contrasting with this are societies where interactions between strangers are expected to be more personable and friendly—that is, where they often attend more directly to positive face wants. In these societies, it would be considered rude to talk in ways that emphasise the social distance between the interlocutors. The stereotype about Australians is that they are much more informal than other English speakers, i.e., they pay more attention to positive face wants.
This greater orientation to positive face wants means that people tend to call each other by their first names, even in professional contexts (though this seems to still be true more in North American and Australian universities than in UK universities). This tendency interacts with other social factors, such as the addressee’s age and sex. For example, younger university professors are more likely to be addressed by their first name than their older colleagues are. Moreover, many women report that they are addressed differently from their male colleagues. Students often address the female professors by their first names or by ‘Mrs. + Surname’, whereas they use ‘Title + Surname’ more often for the male professors. The fact that the politeness strategies speakers choose depends on their evaluation of a number of social factors is an important point that we will return to shortly.

The specific linguistic and non-linguistic strategies that display attention to either the speaker’s or the addressee’s face wants can therefore be referred to as ‘positive’ and ‘negative politeness strategies’. Even a very brief exchange such as a greeting can illustrate some of the different linguistic strategies used to express the two kinds of politeness. For example, suppose you were passing by the outdoor tables of a coffee shop and you recognise an old friend who you haven’t seen for some time. You might call out to him using a nickname:

‘Mouse! I haven’t seen you in years. You look terrific! What are you up to?’

Brown and Levinson provide an extensive list of linguistic strategies that express positive politeness, several of which are illustrated in this example. The use of familiar terms (here, a nickname ‘Mouse’), showing attention to the addressee’s interests (what are you up to? ) and exaggerating the speaker’s interest or approval (you look terrific!) are all strategies that attend to the addressee’s positive face wants.

Other greetings attend more to the hearer’s negative face wants, for example:

‘Excuse me, Dr Michaels, I’m sorry but could I just interrupt you for one moment?’

The politeness strategies here include a deferential form of address (Dr Michaels), an apology (Excuse me; I’m sorry) and an attempt to minimise the request (just; one moment). These are negative politeness strategies because they attend to the addressee’s negative face wants, that is, to their desire to be left alone to pursue their own actions or interests unimpeded.

Choosing politeness strategies: power, distance and cost of the imposition

When we make decisions about exactly what kinds of strategies would be polite or impolite in a given situation, we must evaluate a number of different factors. Brown and Levinson identify three specific factors. We consider how great a power difference there is between the speaker and the addressee; we consider how great the social distance is between the speaker and the addressee; and we evaluate the cost of the imposition.

We generally put more effort into being polite to people who are in positions of greater social power than we are. For instance, I am more polite to the government official processing my passport application than I am to the telemarketer who calls me during dinner. That is because I want the official in the passport office to do me a favour and speed up my application, but when the telemarketer rings me I am the one with the power and they need something from me. That is the effect of power on politeness.

Similarly, the social distance between speakers has a tremendous impact on how they speak to each other. We are generally more polite to people who we don’t know very well, and we generally feel we can be more abrupt with people who are close friends. If you are cooking a meal with a close friend or family member, you might simply say ‘You’ve got the butter’ instead of ‘I think the butter is closer to you than it is to me, so could you pass it to me’. However, if you are working on a task with someone you are not so close to, you might ask in a less direct way, showing more attention to their negative face wants – ‘Excuse me, are those the telephone accounts? Could I have them for a second?’
The third factor that Brown and Levinson believed was important was how big the social infraction is. This was what they meant by the cost of the imposition. So, to continue the example of requests, different requests have different social weight. Asking someone the time is generally considered a minor imposition. As a consequence, you can ask complete strangers for the time and the politeness strategies we use pay relatively little attention to face wants. For example, you can ask ‘Sorry, do you have the time?’ or even just ‘What time is it?’ However, asking for money is generally considered a greater imposition, and usually you would only do this with someone you are fairly close to. And the more money you want to request, the better you will probably want to know them. For example, in the last few months I have found myself needing 5 pence so I can get the bus home and I borrowed this from an acquaintance, but the day when I left my credit cards at home I had to ask a very close friend to lend me enough money to buy my groceries.

So under this framework there are three social variables that shape how people choose which politeness strategies they will use. Their attention to others’ positive and negative face wants will be determined by the relative power and social distance of the people involved, and by the social cost of the imposition. As a number of people working within this framework have noted, the three factors are not independent. You are often not very close to someone who is in a position of power or authority over you, so power and distance are overlapping measures. And how we evaluate cost of imposition is also partly a function of the social distance or the power one person has over the other. This was shown clearly in the examples I gave in the last paragraph, I mentioned how well I knew the person I was borrowing money from. Similarly, we do not feel that asking someone to tell you the time carries much cost, for a number of reasons. One reason is that the time is not considered to be anyone’s property or secret knowledge, nor is it particularly troublesome to look at your watch and tell someone what time it is. But it is also relatively low in cost because it doesn’t change anything about the social order in doing so. The social distance and relative power of everyone involved remain unchanged. Despite this lack in independence, I believe they are still useful factors for us to bear in mind when we consider the variable ways in which people are polite or impolite to each other.

**Inherently face-threatening acts**

Brown and Levinson suggest that some conversational events are **inherently face-threatening acts (FTA)**. That is, once you undertake one of these acts, it is impossible not to have somebody’s positive or negative face wants threatened (sometimes it will be the speaker’s, sometimes it will be the hearer’s). This means that whenever one of these acts happens in a conversational exchange, the participants have to make a decision about how polite they will be.

We can divide **speech acts** according to whether they are a threat to the addressee’s or the speaker’s face wants. Giving an order and making a request are both threats to the addressee’s face wants, and so are expressions of disagreement. But giving an order threatens the addressee’s negative face wants because it is at odds with their desire to have their actions allowed, while expressing disagreement threatens their positive face wants because it is at odds with their desire to have their wants seen as desirable by others.

(see table on next page)
Table 5.1 Examples of FTAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whose face is threatened</th>
<th>Type of face threatened</th>
<th>Positive face</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addressee</td>
<td>Orders or requests,</td>
<td>Disapproval, criticism,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threats or warnings,</td>
<td>Disagreement,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compliments</td>
<td>Bringing bad news about the hearer,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interrupting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaker</td>
<td>Accepting an apology,</td>
<td>Making an apology,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saying thank-you</td>
<td>Showing lack of control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table also reminds us that some politeness strategies are speaker-centred and attend to the speaker’s face wants. This is shown in the bottom row of the table, where expressing thanks and making an apology are identified as examples of threats to the speaker’s face wants. Saying ‘thank you’ communicates that the speaker is in debt to the other person, and speakers may be setting themselves up to have their actions impeded at some time in the future.

Making an apology is a threat to the speaker’s positive face because it involves admitting that we have done something that is socially bad. In other words, you have to state publicly that you did something stupid or unkind or tasteless. For example, you apologise if you forget your mother’s birthday, or put a dent in your friend’s car. If everyone knows that you acted stupidly, unkindly or tastelessly, then other people may be unlikely to identify with you. Hence they will be unwilling to suggest that they have the same wants and desires as you, since everyone knows now that your actions include stupid or unkind things.

Depending on how serious an FTA is, it will require more or less action to reduce the potential damage to the addressee’s or the speaker’s face. At one extreme, a very small FTA can simply be done without requiring very much action to reduce the problem. Brown and Levinson call this ‘going on record’. Going on record means that the speaker simply does the face-threatening act and doesn’t need to use any strategies of positive or negative politeness.

At the other extreme, an FTA might seem so serious that the speaker simply cannot bear to undertake it – in this case, silence is the ultimate way to reduce the damage. In between silence and going on record, various kinds of actions can be taken to reduce potential damage to either participant’s face. This includes doing the FTA indirectly or just hinting at the idea, or doing things that directly attend to either positive or negative face wants. We will shortly see some specific examples of all these strategies and this will help to ground the theory in everyday language use.

It is worth noting that there is a problem with trying to analyse absent FTAs (the situations where the speaker simply chooses not to say anything). The problem highlights the difference between what we are doing when we analyse variation in politeness and variations in other parts of language such as pronunciation. The difference is quite simple and depends on whether there is a predictable context in which the variable occurs. For example, it is possible to identify every context in which [r] sounds could occur, and then we can investigate whether for each context it is present or absent. But we can’t do this with FTAs. There is no way to know when an FTA should or might
happen. When an FTA is not present in conversation, we don’t usually know whether a speaker thought of undertaking the FTA but chose silence instead, or whether the speaker simply didn’t think of undertaking the FTA in the first place.

Some examples of going on record with an FTA will illustrate how speakers will usually only go on record if the imposition has a low social cost, or in a situation with low social distance between the participants.

(2) What’s the time? (request)
Pass the salt. (order)
You’ve got toothpaste on your shirt. (criticism or bad news)
It’s not ready yet. (warning)
Sorry. (make apology)

Going on record means saying what you want to say without adding any politeness strategies, as in the examples above. However, a lot of FTAs are softened by some sort of polite language. Politeness strategies that reduce the threat to negative face wants are the kinds of linguistic strategies we think of first when we talk about someone being polite or impolite. Since negative face wants refer to a person’s desire not to have their actions impeded, if you want to reduce the threat to someone’s negative face you might qualify the FTA in some way. For example, you might suggest that the addressee has some options in how they respond, or you might try to minimise the FTA, show deference or depersonalise it. In (6), both the type of FTA and the politeness strategy are identified:

(6) Could you tell me the time? (request: does not assume the addressee must do it)
There’s something on your shirt. (bad news about hearer: minimise; depersonalise)
Gentlemen, you can’t park there. (warning: show deference)
I’m sorry to interrupt . . . (interrupting: apologise)

On the other hand, because positive face wants refer to people’s desire to have their wants and desires shared by others, a threat to positive face wants can be reduced by suggesting that the speaker and the addressee do share similar wants and desires, or by suggesting that they are both members of an in-group.

(7) Pass the salt, honey? (request: in-group identity marker)
A: Sorry about that. B: Oh it could happen to anyone. That’s OK. (accept apology: suggest common ground)
For your safety and the safety of others, do not inflate the life vest until you leave the aircraft. (warning or order: give reason; be inclusive)
You’ve done a great job with the model, but we ought to also try Liz’s idea. (disagreement: show attention to positive face wants; be inclusive)

If you compare the examples in (6) and (7) with Table 5.1, you will notice that attention to positive and negative face wants can reduce threats to either negative or positive face. For instance, a request, which in Table 5.1 is classified as a threat to the addressee’s negative face, can be softened either by showing attention to their negative face wants in (6), or by showing attention to their positive face wants in (7). So the relationship between a threat to a participant’s face wants and the type of action taken to reduce that threat is complex, and becomes even more complicated when speakers show attention to negative and positive face wants at the same time. For example, “Could you tell me the time, love?” uses negative politeness with “could you” and the positive politeness of calling the person “love”.
When the cost of the imposition becomes very high or when the distance and power differential between the speaker and addressee is very great, then even more softening is required. This may involve going ‘off record’ and trying to hint at what you want; for example, asking ‘Is that the salt?’ instead of saying ‘Pass the salt’.

Some case studies of the theory at work

Let’s look at how this theory works by examining some specific examples of what would be considered face-threatening acts. The first one we will consider is making a request or giving an order. As we have seen, these present a potential threat to the addressee’s negative face wants, because they necessarily involve infringing on the addressee’s actions by getting them to do something they had not planned to do. The second example is an apology which presents a threat to the speaker’s positive face since it involves admitting to having done something that is socially bad.

Here is the situation for the request or order. It’s a cold day and the room you are in has a window open. You feel like you are freezing. The open window is much closer to your friend Sam than it is to you. You can:

Table 5.2 Options for request

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don’t do the FTA</th>
<th>Do the FTA but reduce the face threat</th>
<th>Do the FTA without reducing the face threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Say nothing and continue freezing</td>
<td>(silence)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isn’t it cold in here?</td>
<td>Off record, just a hint</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m sorry. Could you do me a favour and shut the window?</td>
<td>Negative politeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You look cold, Sam. Should we shut the window?</td>
<td>Positive politeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shut the window, Sam.</td>
<td>Go on record</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Now consider the scenario for the apology. A friend asked you to look after her pet fish while she was on holiday. You fed them too much and they died. You can:

Table 5.1 Options for apology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Don't do the FTA</th>
<th>Do the FTA but reduce the face threat</th>
<th>Do the FTA without reducing the face threat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Say nothing</td>
<td>(silence)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell her that it was the fishes’ fault, they ate too much.</td>
<td>Shift the blame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These fish are awfully hard to look after, no matter how hard you try.</td>
<td>Off record, just a hint</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m sorry your fish died. I’d like to replace them, if I can.</td>
<td>Negative politeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hate having to tell you this, but your beautiful fish died while you were gone. Can we replace them?</td>
<td>Positive politeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorry. I killed your fish.</td>
<td>Go on record and apologize</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now think of what happens if there is a greater power difference between you and the fish owner. Imagine that instead of a close friend’s, it was your university professor who asked you to take care of the fish. You will probably find yourself trying very, very hard to attend to both their negative and positive face wants and your own.

As we noted earlier, people sometimes pay attention to both positive and negative face wants in the same sentence. In addition, they can pay attention to both the speaker and the addressee’s face wants in one utterance. For example, the request that started ‘I’m sorry, could you do me a favour . . .’ was categorised as negative politeness. Certainly, it is true that this whole formula shows great sensitivity to the addressee’s right and desire to have their actions unimpeded: the apology (‘I’m sorry’) makes it clear that the speaker understands she is disturbing the addressee. And yet, as we have also seen, an apology constitutes a threat to the speaker’s positive face. In this case it signals that the speaker is about to do something to disturb the social peace.

APPLICATIONS OF POLITENESS THEORY: INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

We have noted that there are significant differences in how the basic elements of the system – power, social distance, and cost of the imposition – are calculated in different groups. The differences can account for a good deal of variation in how people show politeness. This raises the interesting question of whether Brown and Levinson’s framework can be used to better understand what happens when speakers from different social or cultural backgrounds interact. Some researchers have found this framework useful for explaining problems and misunderstandings in cross-cultural situations. In this section, we will look at one such example.
At the start of the chapter, we contrasted the politeness norms for speakers from different sociolinguistic backgrounds. For example, we briefly considered the differences in how students address university professors in English-speaking universities and in German universities. What happens when people from one community find themselves in a completely different community? At a superficial level, such intercultural contact often strengthens stereotypes about groups, e.g., New Zealanders’ and Australians’ perceptions that the British are distant and unfriendly can perhaps be reduced to a difference in the meaning of social distance between new acquaintances. These differences can lead to misunderstandings between individuals: Australians working in England might think that their co-workers don’t like them.

Intercultural contact can create some quite interesting day-to-day problems for individuals. What happens, for instance, when Japanese students who are used to attending carefully to the negative face wants of their professors move to the US or New Zealand, where the social customs pay more attention to positive face wants – e.g., through the use of first names? This can present them with a contrast between their own sociolinguistic norms and the norms of the community they are now studying in. They can respond to this problem in a number of ways. One way would be to follow their traditional customs of politeness and use the most respectful address forms in English (e.g., ‘Professor Thompson’ or ‘Dr Heycock’). They could also adopt the foreign norms and address their professors as ‘Roumi’ or ‘Dave’.

Along the way to resolving this issue there can be some points of uncertainty. These points are particularly interesting for the sociolinguist because they highlight both the enormous creativity of language users and the ways in which their creativity can be directed by the systems that they are most familiar with. One example was the way that Japanese students in linguistics at the University of Hawaii found a short-term solution that satisfied both US and Japanese sociolinguistic norms.

The Japanese norms for interacting with professors are to use deferential forms of address, such as (Last Name) + Title, as Tanaka does in the example at the start of the chapter when he calls his professor sensei (‘teacher’). At the University of Hawaii, however, most graduate students would call professors by their first name, especially a younger professor. The Japanese students in linguistics began calling the youngest professor by her first name, but they would add the respectful address term sensei to it at the end. For example, instead of the traditional Japanese form, Yoshimi-sensei (‘Professor Yoshimi’), they used Patricia-sensei (roughly, ‘Professor Patricia’). In this way, they ended up with something that satisfied the US norms of positive politeness (using first names) and their own Japanese negative politeness norms based on respect and social distance (using titles). This was a very clever strategy, because the result fulfilled the expectations both of the speakers and the addressee.

Brown and Levinson’s framework has provided a fairly useful foundation for researchers who are interested in describing in detail the mechanics of intercultural communication and miscommunication (e.g., Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Blum-Kulka 1997). There are several reasons for this. For example, the framework provides a simple classification system under which the norms of any group of speakers in any particular context can be defined as more or less oriented to positive or negative face wants. Once the differences between the norms of different groups of speakers have been identified, points of possible intervention and specific training can be proposed in order to avoid cross-cultural miscommunication.

Researchers such as Gabrielle Kasper have looked at a number of the kinds of FTAs that are central to Brown and Levinson’s theory, and they have tried to determine how the sociolinguistic strategies most often used for a particular FTA in the learner’s first language compare with the strategies used by native speakers of the learner’s second language. If specific differences can be identified (e.g., one language tends to conventionally use negative politeness strategies while the other uses positive or negative politeness strategies), teaching can be focused on areas in which the different social and linguistic skills are most likely to be problematic.

For instance, if you want to request a drink in a bar in English you usually use some strategies that attend to the bartender’s negative face wants, e.g., ‘Could I have a glass of red wine, please?’ However, in German it is perfectly appropriate to say something like, Ich kriege ein Rotwein (‘I’ll
have red wine’), with no ‘please’ or ‘could’. It is possible to add bitte (‘please’) and to say könnte (‘could’), but if you used both of them the request would sound strange and slightly arrogant. In some cases, you can imagine that these sorts of differences can cause real social difficulties when learners try to transfer their native-language strategies into the language they are learning. So it is useful for researchers like Kasper to have a framework in which they can describe these differences and prescribe solutions for language teachers.

CRITICISM OF POLITENESS THEORY

As we have seen, Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory can be quite a powerful and effective way of describing the ways in which people are perceived to ‘be polite/impolite’ to each other. We have also seen that it has been readily adopted by some researchers into intercultural communication, and we have seen how the insights from politeness theory have sometimes been used to shed light on more practical and applied questions of language teaching. There are also a number of criticisms of this framework. I will present three: the interdependence of the three variables that form the foundation of Brown and Levinson’s approach, the emphasis on individualism and free choice, and the tendency to mix positive and negative politeness.

The interdependence of power, distance and cost of the imposition

As we have seen, power in this framework is essentially a vertical measure – a relation of superiority and subordination – and distance is essentially horizontal – how closely people know each other. This provides a nice theoretical distinction, but representing power and distance as independent factors is misleading. In practice, power and distance are very often heavily dependent on each other. This can make it difficult to try and keep them separate. Generally the people we know best – that is, the people where there is least social distance – are also roughly our equals, neither our superiors nor our subordinates. When there is a relatively big power differential between individuals, it is also likely that they will be less close to each other socially. So in many cases, if you know the relative distance between people, you can easily predict the relative power between them as well.

Moreover, social distance can be measured in different ways. When there are multiple dimensions on which distance can be calculated, it can be difficult to predict which dimension people will focus on. For example, some students from Hawaii were trying to describe the decisions they make about whether to use Standard American English or Hawaiian Pidgin. The students all agreed that power and social distance are relevant factors in determining whether they will use Standard American English or Pidgin with someone, but they also agreed that the first and most important question was whether or not their addressee was Local (in Hawaii, people talk about those born there as Locals).

Many of the students felt that Localness overrides any other constraints there might be on using a language. If the other person was clearly Local, they said that they would always start out using Pidgin, no matter how formal the context or how little they knew the other person. They reported that even if they were discussing formal matters to do with their enrollment at university or getting a driver’s license, their first concern would be with whether or not their addressee was Local or not. If the addressee was Local, they said they would start the conversation in Pidgin, and then adjust as necessary for other aspects of social distance or power. So social distance cannot simply be explained as how well a speaker knows the addressee.

The emphasis on a speaker’s choices

A number of researchers on politeness have criticised the Brown and Levinson model for focusing too heavily on the speaker. Sachiko Ide, a Japanese sociolinguist, has suggested that this reflects Western values of individualism and does not fit well with societies like Japan where a person’s identity is seen as being related to their group membership, with all the collective rights and responsibilities associated with the group, rather than related to the exercise of rational self-interest that is at the heart of Western theories of identity (Ide 1989).
Some work on intercultural communication has tried to categorize societies according to how **individualist** or how **collectivist** they are. It might be appropriate to describe politeness in terms of the concerns of the speaker and addressee in individualist societies, such as Australia or the US. Setting a high value on autonomy and having choices are attributes that cluster together and help define individualist societies. But in societies with collectivist values, such as Japan, Thailand and China, this approach misses key features that organise the social order, including requirements for polite behaviour. In these societies, Ide argues that in Japanese society it is more important to pay attention to people’s interdependence and to reciprocal relationships. In this context, the importance of discerning social behaviour appropriate to the social situation is emphasised. The Japanese word for this discernment is **wakimae**. Ide argues that **wakimae** is a much better basis for formulating models of politeness in Japan than the kind of individual decisions described in Brown and Levinson’s theory.

It should be noted that the contrast between individualist and collectivist cultures, and the social attributes associated with them, are derived from a study of one multinational corporation (Hofstede 1980). Hofstede presented his findings in terms of the national origin of the employees surveyed, but his research was not designed to thoroughly explore the values and behavioural norms of the nations themselves. This means sociolinguists should be a little cautious about incorporating the distinction between collectivist and individualist cultures into their research. Moreover, work by Morales and his associates suggests that when these ideas are brought down to the level of individuals, the associations between politeness and collectivist/individualist attitudes become very shaky. They found that classifying a person as individualistic or collectivist did not allow them to make reliable predictions about what politeness strategies they would choose under different circumstances (Morales et al. 1998).

*Mixed messages: showing attention to both positive and negative face*

Also, in some of the earlier examples we saw that people can pay attention to positive and negative face wants in a single sentence, and we noted that it is not clear how such examples should be analysed. They certainly don’t cancel each other out, but would we want to categorise the sentence as an example of positive politeness, or negative politeness? The problem can be extended beyond the individual to the group. There are no groups of speakers who use only positive or negative politeness strategies, and there are no communities that are completely collectivist or individualistic. I have used national stereotypes in a number of illustrations of how politeness works, but by definition a stereotype simplifies from the complexity and diversity that actually exists. An American reader might justly object that while it is true that individualism is highly valued in the US, it is also true that many groups within the US show a strong sense of community and group identity: Italian-Americans, African-Americans, Polish-Americans, etc. Likewise, a Japanese reader might object that Japanese society is just as well known for the celebration of highly individual expressions in personal fashion as it is for its emphasis on skill in knowing how to show politeness.

One of the criticisms of Brown and Levinson’s framework is that it very easily leads analysts towards overly simplistic categorisations, such as ‘Thai society attends to deference and negative face, while Australian society attends to familiarity and positive face’. Such generalisations are especially bad if they are based on studies of only one or two FTAs.

**CHAPTER SUMMARY**

Politeness strategies can in some ways be seen as sociolinguistic variables. As they are used to negotiate a position for a speaker in relation to others, they perform similar functions to the alternations between languages or styles within a language, and even changes in pronunciation that can show that one person identity is different from others’. However, politeness strategies are different from the kinds of sociolinguistic variables that we have looked at already in previous chapters. Those variables are realised by variants which stand in mutual opposition to each other (e.g., you must choose one pronunciation or the other, but not both), and do not change the linguistic meaning of the utterance even if their social meaning differs. Politeness strategies are not like this.
Different strategies can be used together, reinforcing each other and adding to the overall message. Politeness strategies generally do add some meaning. In some cases it may not be great, but in other cases – say when the speaker offers to do something for someone else out of politeness – the politeness strategy clearly conveys some kind of meaning or idea of its own.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is an attempt to formalise how our choice of phrases, or even single words, fits into the complexities of the social order. Like other work in sociolinguistics, it attempts to find patterns and systems within diverse linguistic variation. One reason why it remains attractive, despite some very valid criticism, is that it provides a clear framework for studying linguistic variation above the level of sounds and inflections. Moreover, some of the criticisms are quite constructive; they might focus our attention on ways in which work on politeness needs to develop in the future if it is to fully capture all the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural richness we are interested in.

KEY TERMS

negative politeness strategies -- ways of being polite that show honor or respect to the other person  
positive politeness strategies -- ways of being polite that emphasise friendliness towards the other person  
facing -- a person's desire or need to protect his or her social 'face'  
negative face -- wanting other people to not stop you from doing what you want  
positive face -- wanting other people to support and agree with the things you want  
social distance -- the degree of familiarity between two people; how well they know each other  
power -- authority; the ability to make decision about other people's lives  
cost of imposition -- how much trouble you will cause for another person by your action  
inherently face-threatening acts -- certain events in conversation that always create the possibility for someone to lose face; for example, making a request or expressing criticism  
speech acts -- actions that are done by speaking, for example apologies or requests  
go on record -- within Brown & Levinson's theory, to do a face-threatening act without using any strategies of politeness  
absent FTA -- a face-threatening act that doesn't actually happen because the speaker decides not to say anything about it  
in-group -- a small group of people with some shared interest or identity  
individualist -- (often used to describe societies or cultures) tending to put value on the freedom and importance of individual people  
collectivist -- (often used to describe societies or cultures) tending to put value on the importance of the community and relationships between people  
wakimae -- in Japanese society, the ability to understand what behavior is most socially appropriate in a situation

PEOPLE

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson -- sociolinguists who created the very influential Politeness Theory

LANGUAGES

Japanese

German

Hawaiian Pidgin

QUESTIONS

• According to Brown and Levinson, what is the difference between positive and negative politeness? How can people show positive or negative politeness?  
• How do Brown and Levinson use the idea of face in their theory of politeness?
• Why would differences in power, social distance, or cost of imposition affect the kind of politeness needed in a social situation?
• What kind of actions are inherently face-threatening? Why do they get special attention in politeness theory?
• How is politeness theory useful for intercultural communication?
• What are some weaknesses of Brown and Levinson's theory?