

The Analysis of Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party" in Terms of Politeness Theory

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Abstract: *This paper reports a comprehensive study of the politeness phenomenon in Pinter's well-known play, "The Birthday party". It aims at figuring out how politeness strategies are used by the characters and how the variables of power influence the choice of politeness levels. In order to analyze the play's text Brown and Levinson's universal model of politeness was used. The model is characterized by three variables which are power, distance and rank extremity. Careful screening of the dialogues demonstrates that a good many of politeness strategies were used in the drama. However, different preferences were found in the use of the strategies towards the positive pole. The findings of this study suggest that the assertion of power is a complicated process which can not merely be explained by the high frequency of the use of certain strategies and an interlocutor's power depends upon many factors like the role of the interlocutor and his/her status in the particular interaction, and in relation to the addressee.*

Keywords: Politeness theory; Face work; Politeness strategies; Power; "The Birthday party" play.

1. INTRODUCTION

Politeness is not an inborn attribute but is gained through the socialization process. Politeness in this sense is not a "natural" phenomenon which existed before mankind but one which has been socioculturally and historically constructed. "People tend to be considerate because this repays them with a pleasant feeling of satisfaction. It is a multiple reward. You give and take and thus participate in maintaining the necessary equilibrium of relationships". Linguistically, politeness can be defined as the interactional balance achieved between the need for clarity and the need to avoid interactional imposition.

If an individual wants to learn a language, he must, in addition to grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, learn the rules of speaking. These rules are shared by speakers of the language and govern their spoken behavior. As a result, in recent years attention was diverted from linguistic competence to communicative competence which includes concepts of appropriateness and acceptability. One of the important components of communicative competence into which a lot of research has been done is the rules of politeness.

To be a successful language user, then, a speaker must possess knowledge regarding face management strategies. The specific manifestation of these strategies is captured quite clearly in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory.

The present paper is an account of politeness phenomenon by way of examining how politeness is employed by the characters of Harold Pinter's "The Birthday Party" to redress the performance of the face threatening acts in the light of Brown and Levinson's concept of politeness which expects to find the expressions of politeness in the selected dialogues of the characters with regard to their social power.

Brown and Levinson's model offers a tool to describe the quality of social relationships; thus, it can serve as a discourse framework in the analysis of literary dialogue. This theory attracted much attention and was applied by numerous linguists to the analysis of different literary texts such as poetic works and prose but, when it comes to the analysis of drama there are still inadequacies since the focus of most of previous works was on word choice and sentence structure.

This study, therefore, aims to determine whether the claims made by the model would hold true if the play is analyzed concerning the politeness strategies employed by the characters and whether Brown and Levinson's analysis about the effect of power between speakers and hearers on the use of politeness strategies is adequate or not. The enquiry behind this issue is formulated in the following research questions:

- 1) What type of politeness strategies are employed by the characters of Harold Pinter's "The birthday party"?
- 2) How do the social variables of power influence usage of politeness strategies by the characters of Harold Pinter's "The birthday party"?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The main building blocks in Brown and Levinson's theory are Goffman's seminal study of "face" and Grice's logic of conversation. Grice puts forward the cooperative principle (CP), on which many scholars base their own writings, and thereupon the politeness study is inspired to spring up. Lakoff was among the first researchers to adopt Grice's framework in an attempt to explain a model of politeness from a pragmatic perspective. She interprets politeness as those forms of behavior which have been developed in societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction. Lakoff suggests two rules of Pragmatic Competence; the Rules of Clarity and the Rules of Politeness. Leech also recognizes that politeness is an important missing link between the Cooperative Principle and the problem of how to relate sense to force. Gu's theory, which is a revised form of Leech's theory in the Chinese context explicitly connects politeness with societal norms.

The idea that politeness is essentially indirectness has captured the attention of several scholars conceptualizing and examining politeness. Some argue that indirectness does not necessarily imply politeness, as results from a study indicate that individuals don't always evaluate the most indirect approaches as the most polite. In this research, politeness is defined as a balance between two needs: the need for pragmatic clarity and the need to avoid coerciveness. Respondents considered that a certain adherence to the pragmatic clarity of a message is an essential component of politeness – that is, the practicing of social conventions yielding clarity in the message. However, too much pragmatic clarity, or too much coerciveness decreases politeness, rendering direct messages perceived as impolite, because they indicate a lack of concern with face. Further, non-conventional indirect strategies (hints) can be perceived as impolite in their lack of concern for pragmatic clarity – their vagueness and ambiguity tends to reduce their perception of politeness.

Several researchers have pointed out that face concerns are culturally specific. Some work considers face as relational and interactional, rather than an individual, phenomenon. This means that the social self, or face, is achieved in relationships with others via interaction. Positive and negative face are re-conceptualized in terms of the contradictory tensions between connection with and separation from others. Some research argues that Brown and Levinson's model doesn't adequately account for people of all nations and cultures, and that the dynamics of face in cultures such as China and Japan call for an alternative, more flexible framework. Here, researchers identify two competing forces shaping our interactional behaviors: ideal social identity and ideal individual autonomy. Face in China is highly complex, and relies on a persistent, mutually shared orientation toward constructing an ideal social identity.

The field of politeness research holds a few twists and turns, as most research areas do. Researchers disagree on definitions and applications of politeness and impoliteness. Nevertheless, we all know, as a practical matter, that politeness matters — however we would like to define it. In a conversation about communicating with diplomacy and tact, a little digging into the theoretical ideas behind politeness can illuminate some of the complexity surrounding politeness classifications and usages. Perhaps it can be overly simplified as a matter of speaker, hearer, and context, all of which come into play in determining the appropriateness of a verbal or nonverbal communication behavior. We know that indirectness can be perceived as more polite than directness, and in this vein, perhaps asking questions, rather than making declarative statements, can mitigate a FTA.

Face has been defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". For example, instructors expect that they will be respected as the authority in a classroom, if students do not respond to the instructor in a manner that conveys the expected respect, they threaten the face of the instructor in front of the class. Students, too, expect to be treated as valued and intelligent members of the classroom environment. If an instructor corrects or criticizes them, they may feel they have lost face because their competence has been called into question. When people interact, they automatically activate a combination of face concerns about their own face and that of others. Individuals look bad when they maintain their own face without showing any regard for others with whom they are speaking. Face work is the communication used to maintain the image of individuals in the exchange. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory proposed that the main mechanism by which individuals conduct facework is by selecting from among five levels of politeness, or indirectness, to mitigate a potentially face threatening remark. The least face threatening

strategy is not performing the act at all, also called avoidance. Avoiding making a face threatening act altogether, however, negates the possibility that potential target may agree to a request. The most face threatening strategy, bald-on-record politeness, completely disregards hearers' face concerns by making an unqualified request or remark. Three intermediate levels of politeness were also proposed, though they have rarely been operationalized in research. To determine which level of indirectness to employ in a potentially face threatening action speakers are posited to consider three factors: 1) the power difference between the two individuals, 2) the social distance between the two individuals, 3) and the level of imposition from the specific act. Individuals are usually more polite when another person maintains a higher power position or is not socially close to them, and when the act is highly face threatening. They can be less polite when the situation is reversed.

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIO

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, first published in 1978, reissued in 1987, generates a wealth of conceptual and empirical researches. According to Brown and Levinson's theory politeness is defined as the speaker's attempts to manage the potentially disruptive nature of speech acts with the intent to save the face of others. In their work they attempt to relate the following aspects: face, facework and acts that threaten face (FTAs), sociological variables influencing face threat and five general ways or "super-strategies" of counterbalancing face threat with at least some linguistic strategies.

Brown and Levinson take the participants in discourse as a Model Person (MP) who is endowed with properties of rationality and "face", the public self-image that everyone wants to claim for himself, consisting of two aspects:

- 1) Negative face: the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others.
- 2) Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.

FTAs are any act, verbal or non-verbal, which threatens the way in which an individual sees her/himself or would like to be seen by others. Since it is of mutual interest to save each other's face, FTAs are either avoided (if possible) or different strategies are employed to counteract or soften the FTA; these strategies are presented in the form of five super-strategies for performing FTAs. Brown and Levinson refer to the five strategies, bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record and without the face threatening acts, as "super-strategies".

First, the speaker has to decide whether to do or not to do the FTA; if he decides to do it, then he must decide to do it either on record or off record (e.g., by using irony, understatement, rhetorical questions). If the decision is to go on record, the speaker must perform the act with or without redressive action (e.g., "turn off the light, please" versus "turn off the light"). Finally, if the speaker chooses to perform a FTA with redressive action, he/she must do it using positive or negative politeness strategies (e.g., "Nancy, honey, turn off the light" versus "Could you please turn off the light?"). Overall, Brown and Levinson view linguistic politeness as a means of conflict avoidance.

The super-strategies are employed according to the degree of face threat involved in an act and the assessment of the amount of face threat depends on three factors: relative power of the speaker, social distance (between the interlocutors), and rank (degree of imposition).

Some research counters Brown and Levinson's politeness theory by arguing that rather than dealing with politeness, per se, Brown and Levinson actually address the mitigation of face-threatening acts. That is, they don't talk about how to be polite, but rather how to not threaten someone's face. Whether or not this is the same thing is a matter of some debate. Some research suggests that polite behavior goes beyond political behavior, which is defined as "that behavior, linguistic and nonlinguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction." This is behavior that is generally perceived to be appropriate, given the social constraints of a particular situation. Saying, "Yes, please," to the waitress when she offers you more coffee is an example of politic behavior – it doesn't stand out as being particularly polite or impolite, but rather merely socially appropriate. Polite behavior, then, is behavior beyond what is perceived as appropriate to the ongoing social interaction.

Politeness goes beyond what is expected. To further our example from above, replying to the waitress's inquiry of whether we'd like more coffee, we might respond with, "Oh yes, please! Coffee would be wonderful. That's very kind of you." In this sense, then, polite behavior goes above and beyond what is merely called for. Several researchers offer varying definitions and sub-classifications of politeness. Research from 1990 posits four main

approaches to viewing politeness: as a “social norm”; as a component of “conversational maxim” (rules guiding conversations); as “face-saving” (Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory fits here); as “conversational-contract.”

Other researchers argue that politeness is strategic conflict-avoidance, as well as a means of social indexing. That politeness should be understood as strategic conflict-avoidance is exemplified in the perception that “the basic social role of politeness is its ability to function as a way of controlling potential aggression between interactional parties,” or within the perception of politeness as connected with smooth communication, or with avoiding disruption and maintaining the social equilibrium and friendly relations. Its involvement in social indexing is exemplified in the idea that politeness is socially appropriate behavior, and what is deemed socially appropriate rests on the social position of the speaker in relation to the hearer.

4. METHODOLOGY

This was a type of content analysis research which was conducted to apply Brown and Levinson’s politeness model on “The Birthday Party” drama.

4.1 Research Data

As in the investigation of politeness phenomenon plays provide reliable data in natural social situations and the character to character level of interaction can be subjected to the same analytic procedures as naturally-occurring conversation, the data source for this investigation was Nobel-prize winning playwright Harold Pinter’s “The Birthday Party”; which is the first full-length play by Harold Pinter and one of Pinter’s best-known and most-frequently performed plays.

4.2 Procedure

In order to figure out the uses of politeness strategies in the drama, the researchers followed the four steps below:

- 1) Identify the main characters.
- 2) Identify the kind of politeness strategies.
- 3) Assess the social variables of power.
- 4) Calculate and compare the frequency of each strategy.

4.3 Data Analysis

Due to the complex and social nature of politeness phenomenon and with regard to the type of data in this study qualitative methods of analysis were used as the major way of evaluation. In addition, quantitative approach was also used for calculating frequency counts and facilitating comparison of the findings. After identification of the sort of strategies, the frequency of occurrence of these strategies was manually calculated and compared for all participants in the play.

5. RESULTS

5.1 The Politeness Strategies in “The Birthday Party” Drama

All the four super-strategies of politeness are used in the drama; however, there are differences in characters’ preference in the use of different politeness strategies. When performing the FTAs characters had a clear preference for the use of positive politeness, with the frequency of positive politeness strategies being high while that of bald on record strategies is rather low.

In addition, the off-record and negative politeness strategies are equally used.

5.2 Comparison of the Politeness Strategies Used by the Main Characters of “The Birthday Party” Drama in Paired Relations

In order to have an in depth study of the politeness strategies it was aimed at analyzing the speeches involving the same two characters and comparing the frequency of the use of these strategies in the form of paired relations.

Regarding the dialogues of the characters in the play there are six distinct interactions including: 1. Meg and Petey, 2. Meg and Stanley, 3. Meg and Goldberg, 4. Goldberg and McCann, 5. Goldberg and Stanley and, 6. Stanley and McCann.

In Meg-Petey interaction, it is realized that as Meg and Petey are husband and wife there is not a great difference regarding their relative power over each other but as we proceed reading the play we can see that Meg has a type of personality that makes her husband to be more powerful in comparison with her. We can also infer that the couple is so familiar with each other that there is very low or almost no distance between them. Through the dialogue exchanges between these two characters, Meg uses 67 times of politeness strategies while Petey uses only 40 times of these strategies.

In Meg-Stanley interaction, the social distance is very low because Stanley is living in Meg and Petey's house for a long time and they know each other very well so the frequency of interaction between them is high. Regarding the power element it is implied that although Stanley is the tenant and Meg is the landlady, Meg lets Stanley to stay in higher position than her in an attempt to make him feel satisfied and not think of leaving that home since she has a kind of mother sense towards him. In their interaction Meg uses 52 times of politeness strategies and Stanley uses 48 times of them.

In Meg-Goldberg interaction, as Goldberg is a newcomer to Meg's house, they are recently introduced to each other and the frequency of interaction between them is very low thus the social distance between them is high. Although it is expected that Meg as the hostess should stand in a higher position than Goldberg, the story of the play implies that Goldberg is not such a simple guest but an agent who comes to that house for carrying out a mission to capture Stanley with the trace of threat evident in all of his dialogues hence, regarding the power element Goldberg is more powerful than Meg. Dialogue exchanges between them show that Meg uses 27 times of politeness strategies and Goldberg uses 48 times of these strategies.

In Goldberg-McCann interaction, they are cooperating with each other for years and as they form a team that has the common goal of arresting Stanley and taking him away from boarding house, the frequency of interaction between them is high and they know each other very well thus, distance between these two characters is very low. In their team Goldberg is the mastermind and McCann is the follower who runs Goldberg's commands; in consequence Goldberg is more powerful than McCann. The analysis of dialogues between these two characters shows that Goldberg uses 50 times of politeness strategies while, McCann uses 31 times of them.

In Goldberg-Stanley interaction, Goldberg is referred as a stranger who at first enters the boarding house as a visitor that Stanley and the householders knew nothing about him so, the frequency of interaction between them is very low and the distance is very high. As the story proceeds, we understand that Goldberg and his attendant McCann have not chosen to go to that house by chance but they were planning to implement the project of arresting Stanley and in order to accomplish their goal they threaten everyone specially Stanley himself. The relationship between Stanley and Goldberg which is always along with a kind of threat from the part of Goldberg shows that Goldberg is standing in a higher position than Stanley and he is more powerful than him. Dialogue exchanges between them reveal that Goldberg employs 45 times of politeness strategies and Stanley uses 25 times of them.

In Stanley-McCann interaction, like Goldberg, McCann is just introduced as a stranger who comes to have a rest in the boarding house where Stanley is living for a long time so, at first they did not know each other and the frequency of interaction is very low and the distance between them is very high. Regarding the power element, as already explained, McCann is accompanying Goldberg to take Stanley away and this issue makes him more powerful than Stanley. In their interaction Stanley uses 43 times of politeness strategies and McCann uses 33 times of them.

5.3 The Effect of Power on the Use of Politeness Strategies

In this study the effect of power on the use of politeness strategies is examined through the comparison of the frequency of the use of these strategies in the form of six interactions between the main characters of the play.

The result of the analysis suggests that the assertion of effect of power element is a very complicated process which can not merely be explained by the high frequency of use of certain strategies. For example, in interaction between Meg and Petey or that between Meg and Stanley where in both cases distance between characters is perceived to be

low the powerful character uses lower number of politeness strategies than his/her partner. In Meg-Petey relation Meg uses 67 times of politeness strategies while they are only used 40 times by Petey as the powerful character or in Meg-Stanley interaction, Meg employs 52 times of these strategies while Stanley as the powerful character uses 48 times of them. But, there is controversy in Goldberg-McCann interaction where although like the two previous interactions the distance between these two characters is low, the powerful character namely, Goldberg uses higher number of politeness strategies with the frequency of 50 times than McCann who only uses 31 times of them. The same is true about the next three main interactions of the play where distance between the characters is perceived to be high. For instance, in Stanley-McCann relation, McCann as the powerful character uses lower number of politeness strategies with the frequency of 33 times while Stanley uses 43 times of them. But, in Meg- Goldberg and in Goldberg-Stanley interactions the condition is different; in Meg- Goldberg relation, Goldberg as the powerful character uses higher number of politeness strategies with the frequency of 48 times while Meg only uses 27 times of them. Also, in Goldberg- Stanley interaction Goldberg as the powerful character uses higher number of these strategies with the frequency of 45 times while Stanley only uses 25 times of them.

These findings show that an interlocutor's power besides the sum of strategies used is dependent upon many factors, such as, for example, the role of the participants in the interaction, their social status and the ensuing rights and obligations holding between them. Also important is the response he/she receives from the addressee and other participants in the interaction.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study has yielded the following findings:

- 1) In the "The Birthday Party" drama, the people used a large number of politeness strategies to perform the FTAs politely. However, different people had different preferences in the use of politeness strategies; in general, all the four super-strategies of politeness were used by the characters. From the conversational exchange between the main characters there has been a general tendency in the use of politeness strategies, moving towards the positive pole.
- 2) The results of the analysis of the play suggest that unlike the predictions of Brown and Levinson powerful characters does not necessarily use the high number of politeness strategies. To be effective, the use of politeness strategies must be congruent with the role of the interlocutor and his/her status in the particular interaction, and more importantly in relation to the addressee.
- 3) The findings from this study also show that the social distance (D) does influence the use of politeness strategies in the drama. In the present study, when it comes to the actual social strangeness or closeness between the speaker and the hearer, the bigger the social distance is, the more polite the speaker tends to be when performing an FTA; the smaller the social distance is, the less polite the speaker tends to be when performing an FTA. This finding is consistent with what Brown and Levinson have predicted.

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