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Clearing the mist: The border between linguistic politeness and social etiquette

Mohammad A. Salmani Nodoushan

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Mohammad Ali SALMANI NODOUSHAN, IHCS, Iran

Even some of the biggest names in pragmatics and politeness oftentimes confuse social etiquette with linguistic politeness. I was recently invited to examine a PhD thesis at a famous university in New Zealand, and it came to me as a shock to realize that neither the PhD candidate nor her thesis supervisors had noticed the difference between these two concepts. Since a clear understanding of rudimentary concepts is fundamental to any research in any field of science, and pragmatics and politeness are not exceptions, this paper aims at putting linguistic politeness in its right frame. I will first review the historical development of modern pragmatics from an Archimedean point; then, I will set politeness theory in its right place inside pragmatics. Finally, I will draw a line between social etiquette and linguistic politeness and argue that junior (and some senior) researchers working on politeness need to be very careful not to confuse the two, or their claims are doomed to be invalid.

Keywords: Linguistic Politeness; Metapragmatics; Politeness; Pragmatics; Social Etiquette

1. Introduction

Over the past five decades or so, there has been an ever-increasing upsurge of interest in empirical studies on linguistic politeness in almost every corner of the world. Researchers have addressed a good number of linguistic structures—e.g., rituals, direct and indirect speech acts, address terms and honorifics, formulaic utterances, hedges and mitigations, particles of various kinds, and so forth—in their studies of politeness, but what appears to be missing in the majority of studies conducted to date is a clear understanding of what linguistic politeness really is. Much of the confusion in what is polite and what impolite has to do with an inadequate understanding of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and notions of positive and negative face, on the one hand, and Goffman's (1959) concept of facework (i.e., 'face' plus 'line'), on the other. To add injury to insult, some people also bring their lay understanding of politeness to the fore. As such, the confusion not only comes from our intermingling of 'polite behavior' with 'polite language use' but also

from a difference between our lay perspectives on 'polite language use' and those of a professional 'pragmatics' scholar.

In this paper, I shall first review the historical development of modern pragmatics in the 20th century from an Archimedean point, and then locate the place of linguistic politeness in the map of pragmatics. I shall then differentiate between first-order and second-order politeness and alert junior politeness researchers of the confusions that may jeopardize their studies.

2. Pragmatics from an Archimedean point

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines an Archimedean point—or Punctum Archimedis—as a hypothetical vantage point from which an observer can not only observe his subject of inquiry objectively but also view it in its totality (Zalta, 2013). An observer standing in an Archimedean point can have a helicopter sight of the whole map of his subject of inquiry. Seen from such a vantage point, pragmatics can be ramified into two major branches: (1) pragmatics as a tradition in philosophy, and (2) pragmatics as a discipline in linguistics. In this paper, I am not interested in a discussion of philosophical pragmatics—which roughly means judging things by outcomes. Rather, I am interested in linguistic pragmatics.

The term 'pragmatics' comes from the Latin word 'pragmaticus' which in turn comes from the Greek word 'pragmatikos' (πραγματικός) which roughly means 'fit for action'. According to Liddell, Scott and Passow (1859), Pragmatikos comes from pragma (πρᾶγμα, meaning deed and/or act), and pragma comes from prassō (πράσσω, meaning to do, to act, to pass over, to practice, to achieve).

Pragmatics as a discipline in linguistics was a reaction, in general, to structuralism broached by Ferdinand de Saussure and expatiated upon by American structuralists of the early 20th century, and, in particular, to Chomsky's (1957, 1965) autonomy of syntax and interpretive semantics. Saussure (1916/1972) had talked about 'langue' (roughly similar to Chomsky's notion of competence), 'parole' (roughly similar to Chomsky's concept of performance), and 'langage' (meaning collective competence). It seemed as if a finite set of abstract rules could enable human beings to perceive and produce an infinite number of meaning-bearing novel utterances; meaning was said to be static and trapped within the confines of syntax/structures. In other words, Saussure's sign-symbol relations and the notion of representation had it that there is an arbitrary static relationship between sense and reference (i.e., the mirror metaphor), an idea that was later rejected by pragmatics. As Morris (1946, 1964) noted, semantics focuses on referents (i.e., the real objects or ideas) to which words refer; syntactics (or syntax) has to do with relationships among signs and symbols; pragmatics

examines the relationships among signs and their uses. Semantics is interested in literal meanings whereas pragmatics examines intended meanings.

Pragmatics rejected the claim that all meaning comes from signs which exist in the abstract space of language. It emphasized its own stance that context and interlocutors bring their potential capabilities to bear on meaning. Structuralists' semantics claimed that meaning is conventional or "coded" in any given language, but pragmatics argued that the negotiation of meaning depends both on linguistic structures (i.e., sense-reference relations) and on a multitude of other factors such as context, intentionality, common ground, shared knowledge, and so forth (Mey, 2001). Although the field was officially welcomed by linguists in the 1970s, it had been around for quite some time in such circles as the Prague linguistic circle (or the Prague school); nevertheless, members of this circle (e.g., Roman Jakobson, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, and Sergei Karcevskiy—among others) never called themselves 'pragmaticists'; the circle opened up the avenue for what came to be known as functionalism (or continental Europe structuralism).
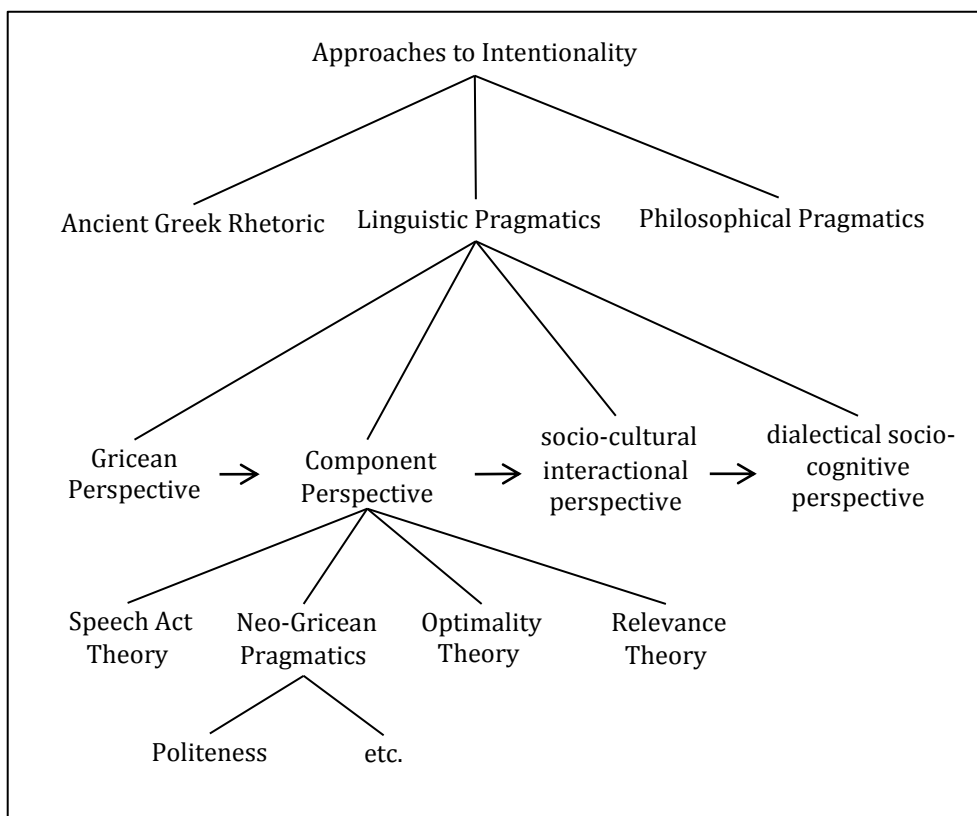

Figure 1. Helicopter sight of modern pragmatics.

A helicopter sight of modern/linguistic pragmatics shows four distinct camps: (1) the Gricean perspective, (2) the component perspective, (3) the socio-cultural interactional perspective, and (4) the dialectical socio-cognitive perspective (See *Figure 1* above—arrows show chronological sequencing). According to Salmani Nodoushan (2017), the component perspective itself comprises four major movements: (a) speech act theory, (b) neo-Gricean pragmatics, (c) optimality-theoretic pragmatics and (d) relevance theory. Politeness is one of the offshoots of neo-Gricean pragmatics. Although some would associate politeness with the relevance-theoretic camp, my in-depth analysis of politeness shows that it was originally a neo-Gricean perspective on meaning and intentionality. A discussion of these camps and their ramifications is beyond the scope of this paper, and the interested reader is referred to Allan and Salmani Nodoushan (2015) and Salmani Nodoushan (2017).

3. Linguistic politeness versus social etiquette

An unprofessional treatment of what constitutes polite behavior is to take refuge in general descriptions of politeness often presented by lay people in terms of personal anecdotes, examples, clichés, etc. General statements like 'He is so obliging', 'She is so respectful', 'She is so self-effacing', 'He is so down-to-earth', 'He always helps oldies with their coats' and the like are what lay people quite often resort to when they are asked to describe polite behavior (Watts, 2003). It seems as if people are inclined to judge politeness in terms of 'socially correct/appropriate behavior'. There is indeed no commonly-agreed-upon criterion to tell polite behavior from impolite behavior, and what appears impolite to some people may be considered polite by others (Watts, 2003).

By the same token, polite language usage is also very hard to describe. 'Language that avoids being too direct', 'language that shows respect towards others', 'language that shows consideration for others', etc. are some of the common descriptions that people often give to explain what is meant by polite language usage. Once again, people may base their politeness judgments on speakers' use of such linguistic items as forms of address, honorifics, formulaic utterances (e.g., please, thank you, excuse me, sorry, etc.), or elegantly expressed language (Watts, 2003). Nevertheless, there will still be some other people who would consider speakers' use of the same linguistic items as 'hypocritical', 'insincere', 'dishonest', 'ostensible', 'ritualistic', 'distant', 'unfeeling', and so forth.

As such, evaluating politeness is not as easy as it may seem at first glance. A 'low burp' in the course of a conversation between two close friends, for example, may be overcome by the speaker's use of 'beg your pardon' which is

quite often taken as 'ritualized' and used to overcome what Goffman (1955) calls an 'incident' in speech (Watts, 2003). While the speaker's addressee may take his low burp as a joke, others who witness the incident may consider it as 'impolite' and the speaker's 'beg your pardon' as inadequate. According to Watts (2003), such varied judgments and interpretations of politeness and impoliteness in ongoing conversation may be called 'folk interpretations' or 'lay interpretations'. Nevertheless, folk/lay interpretations are by no means tantamount to 'politeness' and 'impoliteness' as technical concepts in sociolinguistics and politeness theory. Needless to say, the literature on sociolinguistics or politeness theory is fraught with studies that have frequently confused folk/lay interpretations of (im)politeness with the technical interpretation (Watts, 2003; Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 1992).

4. First-order versus second-order politeness

To differentiate between folk/lay interpretations of politeness and the technical interpretation, Watts (2003) expatiates upon the technical terms 'first-order politeness' and 'second-order politeness' which had been broached by Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992). He refers to 'folk' interpretations of (im)politeness as 'first-order (im)politeness'; by way of contrast, he refers to (im)politeness as a concept in a sociolinguistic theory of (im)politeness as 'second-order (im)politeness'. This clarifies the border between what is called linguistic (im)politeness, on the one hand, and social etiquette or lack of it, on the other. Nevertheless, a confusion of these two orders of politeness permeates a great number of studies of politeness that have been conducted to date. I shall return to this issue in my general discussion below.

Ellen (2001), too, refers to first-order politeness as (im)politeness1 and to the second-order politeness as (im)politeness2. Ellen further introduces three new technical terms to any discussion of first-order politeness: (1) metapragmatic politeness, (2) classificatory politeness, and (3) expressive politeness. He uses 'metapragmatic politeness' to refer to metapragmatic evaluation of the nature and significance of (im)politeness—i.e., 'politeness as a concept'. 'Classificatory politeness' refers to the comments that are made by interactants or outsiders about polite behavior. Participants' deliberate attempt at explicitly producing polite language (e.g., 'beg your pardon' in our 'low burp' example above) is called expressive politeness (Ellen, 2001). As such, his 'expressive' and 'classificatory' first-order politeness types are tantamount to 'politeness-in action'. Politeness-in action refers to the way politeness shows up in communicative behaviour; 'politeness as a concept' refers to the way politeness shows up in commonsense ideologies of politeness (Haugh, 2007). Ellen further argues that expressive politeness can be manifested in either (a) socially constrained utterances or (b) strategically chosen utterances (cf. Watts, 2003). As for politeness2, Ellen (2001, p. 43)

retained Watts et al.'s (1992) characterization of second-order politeness (i.e., "scientific conceptualization of the social phenomenon of politeness") but argued that its key value lies in its ability to 'explain' the "phenomena observed as politeness1" (p. 44).
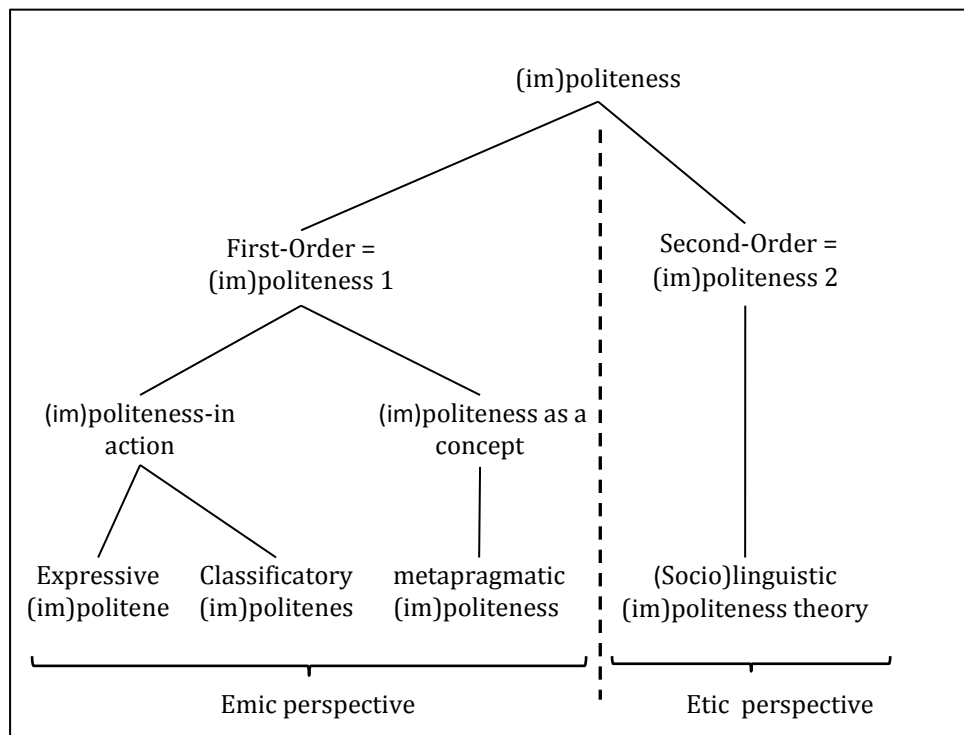

Figure 2. Helicopter sight of politeness.

Citing Watts et al. (1992), Haugh (2007) redefined first-order politeness (politeness1) to include how members of any given sociocultural group 'perceive' and 'talk about' polite behavior. He further emphasized the theoretical/scientific nature of second-order politeness. Watts et al. (1992, p. 4) had argued that ". . . the epistemological status of the theoretical analysis becomes blurred" if we fail to distinguish between "commonsense" and "scientific" evaluations of politeness. The dotted vertical line in *Figure 2* (above) marks the clear border between first-order versus second-order politeness. The area that falls on the left of the dotted line shows 'emic' (or insider) views of politeness whereas the area that falls on the right shows 'etic' (or outsider) views (cf. Harris, 1990; Pike, 1990). Nevertheless, Watts et al. (1992) coined the terms 'first-order' and 'second-order' to sidestep the heated debate between Harris and Pike on what indeed constituted 'emics' and what 'etics'.

For pike (1967), the emic-etic distinction in anthropology and/or sociology was roughly comparable to the famous phonemic-phonetic distinction in linguistic debates (e.g., phonemes are phonemic, but allophones phonetic). Seen in this light, an emic unit is "a physical or mental item or system treated by insiders as relevant to their system of behavior and as the same emic unit in spite of etic variability" (Pike, 1990, p. 28); As such, the variability observed in the realization of emic units in actual use can be termed 'etics'. for Harris (1990, p. 48), however, emic items are "logico-empirical systems whose phenomenal distinctions or 'things' are built up out of contrasts and discriminations significant, meaningful, real, accurate, or in some other fashion regarded as appropriate by the actors themselves" whereas etic units are "phenomenal distinctions judged appropriate by the community of scientific observers." It should be noted that the first- and second-order distinction made by Watts et al. (1992) is very close to Harris' (1990) emic-etic distinction (cf. Haugh, 2007).

More recently, the etic-emic and the first-second order distinctions have been applied to the analysis of face (Haugh, 2007). First-order face refers to folk notions of face; second-order face refers to scientific treatment of face (Haugh, 2007; see also Sifianou, 2011; Terkourafi, 2007, 2009). The earliest etic/second-order conception of face can be traced back to Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of 'facework' in social interaction. For Goffman, facework is a function of two factors: (1) face, and (2) line. 'Face' is the public image of oneself that a speaker projects in social interaction, but 'line' is what he says and does during that interaction. Building on Goffman's notion of facework, Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that every individual has 'face needs' which are positive (e.g., the desire to be loved, liked, appreciated or approved by others), and negative (e.g., the desire not to be imposed upon, intruded, or otherwise put upon). They used the concepts of facework and face needs as a pedestal and founded their politeness theory on that—whereby introducing a new scientific discipline which assumed an 'etic' perspective on politeness. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face needs and facework permeate all aspects of social interaction, and speakers have four options at their disposal which they can bring to bear on their interactions: (1) performing bald face-threatening acts (FTAs) with no politeness, (2) doing FTAs with positive politeness strategies, (3) doing FTAs with negative politeness strategies, and (4) doing FTAs indirectly—or off-record (For a discussion of these points, see Bardzokas, 2019; Oyedokun-Alli & Babatope, 2019; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995, 2014, 2015, 2016).

5. Discussion

Based on what went before, it is easy to notice that much of the controversy that exists in discussions of politeness today has to do with inadequate

professionalism. A great number of politeness studies have confused emic perspectives with etic perspectives. Part of this confusion comes from the fact that politeness has been dislocated from its rightful 'neo-Gricean' position and migrated into (a) the socio-cultural interactional perspective, (b) the dialectical socio-cognitive perspective, (c) the optimality-theoretic camp, or (d) the relevance-theoretic camp. Such dislocations have oftentimes resulted in mistaking emic perspectives for etic ones.

Although Goodwin (1984) has already warned politeness researchers against this confusion, there are still people who fail to notice this important warning (e.g., the PhD thesis at a famous university in New Zealand mentioned in the abstract above). It should be remembered that, as Hymes (1970) has pointed out, "natives normally are neither conscious of their emic system nor able to formulate it for the investigator" (pp. 281-282, as cited in Headland, 1990, p. 21). The New Zealand study, in particular, has assumed an interactional approach to the evaluation of politeness, one in which the researcher and the informants had interacted to achieve an evaluations of politeness and face. Haugh (2012) has already warned us against the emergent, non-summative outcomes of such approaches to the evaluation of politeness and face and has emphasized that informants/participants are hardly—if at all—capable of articulating their emic evaluations of face and politeness without considerable prompting on the part of the researcher; hence an interactional approach to the evaluation of politeness is inadequate.

Emic evaluations of politeness are mainly based on speakers' knowledge of each other, and of their shared cultures. The better interactants know each other, the more precise their judgments of each other's politeness in language and social behavior. As such, emic evaluations are for the most part personal and quite often defy description. People can tell which behavior or utterance is polite, but they oftentimes cannot explain why. Unless quantified scientifically and objectively, any explanation of politeness will at best be polemic.

Etic evaluations of politeness, on the other hand, are based on quantifiable factors and operational definitions. When Grice (1957, 1989), Austin (1975), Leech (1983), and Leech and Thaomas (1985)—among others—talked about such concepts as 'the nature of communication', 'speech acts', 'conversational principles', 'conversational maxims', and the like, they were indeed trying to quantify and/or operationally define concepts that would help us see the notions of face and politeness through an etic lens. More recently, such concepts as context (both 'prior' and 'emergent'), salience, common ground, politeness systems, relevance, clues and cues, hedging, felicity conditions, etc. have enhanced our etic understanding of politeness and face. These concepts help us stand in an Archimedean vantage point from which we can describe

politeness and face objectively and adequately.

6. Conclusion

Given the everyday nature of politeness, we may be surprised to learn that politeness, on the one hand, occupies a central place in social language and, on the other hand, is the topic of hot debate in linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and social theory. One thing that we know for sure is that polite behaviour, in general, and polite language, in particular, must be acquired. Babies are not born with (im)politeness. Rather, they learn polite behavior and language in the process of socialization. Etic evaluations of politeness help communities and cultures to have a clear understanding of politeness and face which they can, in turn, utilize (for instance in books, movies, etc.) to help juniors acquire polite skills.

All in all, the golden conclusion is that our assessment of politeness is for the most part personal rather than being cultural. Different people living in the same culture often have different evaluations of the same behavior or utterance. Just like democracy, beauty, justice, etc., politeness is also a hard concept to quantify, and members of any given society keep struggling over its precise meaning and definition. The question that still remains unanswered is whether emic perspectives on politeness might be more fruitful. What is known for sure is that the social-theoretical bases of current politeness theories are indeed inadequate and cannot adequately explain politeness and face.

The Author

Mohammad Ali Salmani Nodoushan (Email: m.nodoushan@ihcs.ac.ir) is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESOL at Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran. He received his PhD in Applied Linguistics/TESOL from the University of Tehran in November 2002, his MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Isfahan in November 1995, and his BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Shiraz University in September 1991. He has over 25 years of teaching experience and has taught major EFL courses at BA, MA, and PhD levels. Dr Salmani Nodoushan's main areas of interest are politeness and pragmatics, and he has also conducted a number of studies on language education and assessment. He has published a few papers in international academic journals including *Teaching and Teacher Education* (Elsevier), *Speech Communication* (Elsevier), *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* (Wiley), *International Review of Pragmatics* (Brill), *Pragmatics and Society* (John Benjamins), *Intercultural Pragmatics* (Walter De Gruyter), *British Journal of Educational Technology*

(Wiley), and *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* (John Benjamins). He has also (co)authored a few books. Besides his being the editor-in-chief of the *International Journal of Language Studies*, he is a reviewer for a number of journals including *Journal of Pragmatics*, *Pragmatics and Society*, and *Australian Journal of Linguistics*.

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