„Babeş-Bolyai" University

Faculty of European Studies

The Concept of Politeness in Everyday and Professional Discourse

DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY

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Contents

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Summary

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the politeness phenomenon has recorded significant developments and contributions demonstrating that it fully enjoys an overwhelming and increasing popularity among researchers and practitioners alike. This fact has especially become apparent after the publication of the body of research belonging to Goffman (1967), Lakoff (1973), Grice (1975), Leech (1983), Fraser (1975, 1981) and in particular to Brown & Levinson's emblematic description of politeness models functioning and manifestations (1978, 1987). In recent years, the number of publications related to the comprehensive study of politeness has grown impressively transforming this multilayered phenomenon into an area of major interest within academic fields of study such as pragmatics, anthropology, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, culture, organizational management, communication and even cognition. In this context, we would like to mention the important analyses on politeness presented by Escandell-Vidal,1996; Foley 1997; Grundy, 2000; Johnstone, 2002; Wardhaugh, 1998; Xie, 2000; Zhuang, 2001; Watts, 2003; Locher, 2004; Spencer Oatey, 200, 2002, 2004); Bargiela -Chiappini, 2006. The study of the politeness phenomenon is a complex endeavor, one that is constantly confronted with the difficulty of being thoroughly described by one single research

approach. The Social-Normative approach, the Conversational Maxims approach, the Conversational Contract perspective, The Face-saving model or the Social inclusion interpretation of politeness through effective and efficient relational management represent some of the main directions of studying politeness in its sociolinguistic and pragmatic manifestations. The forms the politeness may take in a given society vary enormously. If we try to understand politeness as "*the sum of all those tactics that help maintain the minimum level of harmony in an interactional exchange*", the phenomenon is redefined once again as a multifaceted, dynamic manifestation, constantly present at discourse level (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005) and not as a marginal phenomenon limited by and restricted to a series of established generic formulas proposed in good behavior or appropriate conduct books. Politeness varies from a situational context to another, from one region to another, sometimes within the same space coordinates and it therefore depends on important sociolinguistic parameters such as the distance between speakers, the distribution of power, the cognitive load, the degree of interactional imposition or the social and cultural background the participants are embedded in. The above-mentioned parameters vary all the more so depending on the communicative situation and the type of interaction we take part in whether public or private, informal or institutional, direct or mediated by means of modern technology.

Politeness guidelines regulate interpersonal relationships to ensure the adoption of cooperation and harmony perceived as social goods. However, the need for rule enforcement in particular situations implies the possibility of some conflicts to emerge and threaten the smooth negotiation of meanings and communicative roles. Politeness annihilates or mediates such threats as it normally gives credit to the needs and wants expressed by discourse participants that are endowed with reason and willingness to reach a certain goal. Even in such confrontations that involve equal status, the lack of convergence of interests or decisional instability may be managed in a communicatively appropriate manner by means of rules. Given the existing pressures on achieving interactional goals, there is a constant tension between the social and intentional goals pursued by interactants. These inaccuracies or discrepancies may be shaped up and creatively modified and shaded by and through *politeness* the fulfillment of various functions such as achieving personal, group, social or professional interactional goals or promoting one's identity and self-image.

In this dissertation, we propose the analysis of the politeness concept as part of a wider

socio-pragmatic phenomenon, which has a fundamental impact on the way we communicate and relate to those around us, but perhaps more importantly, to ourselves. To this end, we will focus our research approach on four main aspects, namely the presentation of the theoretical research directions in the field integrating pragmatic politeness within modern approach models, situating politeness within the context of professional discourse and its oral manifestations; moving on, we will consider and analyse two case studies in order to confer applicability to our study and analyze the ways in which politeness is perceived by interactants who are differentiated by status, training/expertise and expectations in the professional context.

2. Major research objectives

This paper focuses on the analysis of pragmatic politeness, with an emphasis on its social-inclusive aspect as the basis for the management of establishing effective, functional relations in everyday and professional communication contexts.

The meaningful administration of the interpersonal relationships is mediated by politeness as a system for applying a series of communication strategies manifested in interactions that include polite, impolite or situationally appropriate behavior. Politeness is the interface between the self-image perceived by the individual and the perception of this image processed by the other discourse participants.

Socio-linguistic and pragmatic politeness is relatively a new scientific field; research in this field dates back to approximately 30 years ago. Therefore, politeness theories and conceptualizations are still strongly debated, undergoing a constant (re)formulation for different contexts and cultures.

In this paper, we perceive *politeness* as a set of strategies used to establish and maintain self-image in interactions in order to express concern for those with whom we communicate as related to our social inclusion, to solving or avoiding conflicts in oral exchanges. My understanding of *politeness* is based on the one hand on Erving Goffman's (1967) concept of *face* and the influential politeness model presented by Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) documenting and supporting the management of self-image (*face*) and, on the other hand, on the social-inclusive interpretation of politeness as an essential incentive for establishing and developing meaningful relationships (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, 2004).

Research applicability and innovation

This dissertation is based on rigorous research of the politeness phenomenon, reviewing the most important theories and approaches that focus on the role the politeness principle plays in shaping up oral discourse. Furthermore, it records data and results applied to highly relevant target groups in the academic environment. We believe that this thesis may have important practical implications and applications due to the interpretation of the importance attached to politeness by real "social actors" in various contexts. For these reasons, the present paper may be useful to specialists in areas such as professional communication, education, modern language instruction and methodology, conflict management, mediation, cognition, information technology or communications.

3. Research structure, motivation and methodology

This paper focuses on several aspects which have been a major part of my research preoccupations and activities over the last ten years. This project has been cumulative in many respects mainly because of the amount of time spent analysing the comprehensive content body of research debated upon. The empirical support gathered to evidence the steps taken in researching pragmatic politeness together with relevant ideas behind a few studies developed here date back several years. Thanks to the *time* element and the number of *persons* who were involved in this research, giving me guidance and advice of an essential nature in order to clarify theoretical or methodological issues, this paper is a joint effort of these individuals (professors, colleagues, students) whom I would like to thank for each contribution.

This thesis is tributary to the extremely fascinating research in the field of politeness and, in our approach, we give credit to the perspectives and conceptualizations of politeness emerged in the last thirty years (e.g. the fundamental model of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987)[1] presenting the sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of the politeness phenomenon with an emphasis on the **social-inclusive** research of **politeness.** This social facet is largely due to my professional orientation and the inclusion of my doctoral project within the scientific field of humanities. The dissertation discusses the most relevant approaches in the field

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[1] Penelope Brown şi Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978; 1987.

of politeness focusing on authors who have had essential contributions in outlining the main theories, principles, strategies and concepts of politeness. It researches how the interactional pragmatic intentions are manifested at sociolinguistic and behavioral level having major social impact on the quality of communication. We will also insist on some necessary issues influencing our analysis in order to contextualize it appropriately: aspects connected to professional discourse with its sensitive representations in oral discourse instances, constantly focusing on the relevance of both professional/oral discourse for the practical contribution to our work: the analysis of the perception of the politeness concept and the importance given to the politeness phenomenon in general by two categories of subjects that interact in the same environment – the academic environment.

The reason for my decision to concentrate on the politeness phenomenon in this thesis is that it plays a most important role in everyday and professional verbal interactions. The politeness rules and conventions govern cooperative behavior in human interactions. Politeness strategies are used by speakers to achieve goals such as *"promotion and maintenance of harmonious relations.*"[2]

As related to the choice of oral discourse in a professional context, this decision is connected to the fact that social-inclusive politeness is relatively under-analyzed in this regard, the most notable existing studies focusing on the interaction taking place within domestic, informal, institutional or professional contexts, exclusively from a (socio) linguistic perspective, without insisting on the social relevance of politeness with the specific purpose of analyzing it with reference to certain categories of interactants and variables. Politeness is an **important social phenomenon**, which enhances the effectiveness and relevance of everyday and professional interactions, modeling behaviors and attitudes toward mutual understanding and achievement of interactional goals.

The main **objectives** of our thesis are:

1. Presentation of the research undergone in the field of politeness in the last twenty years (approximately) with a particular focus on its conceptualization, its specific manifestations and the concept *self-image / face management* (*facework*). The examination of the way the participants establish and maintain social relationships with politeness strategies is also

included.

Incorporating politeness within the professional discourse field (in this paper the phrase *professional discourse* is used with reference to the educational process related oral interactions between current and future professionals).

Description of the features and particularities of the target groups and their need to address relational management effectively in the proposed context.

Analysis and interpretation of quantitative and qualitative data obtained on administering questionnaires and opinion interviews to the subjects of the target groups.

Classification of the obtained interpretations within a *social- inclusive* model of politeness to foster an effective *management of interpersonal relations* consequently proposing new potentially rich research directions starting from this model.

Our research is socially anchored. It will consider attitude, behaviour and sociolinguistic variable interpretations in a very practical and concrete manner - pragmatic analysis of the *politeness concept* in its entirety at the level of professional oral discourse engaged in in the academic environment. The specific contexts that we chose to study in this thesis are, by their very own function, generally formal; hence, -in our view- a purely linguistic analysis would neither serve the rich diversity of the chosen target groups orientations towards politeness nor their interactional interests. Our main objective is to analyze the role of the politeness concept as it is perceived within the (semi) controlled professional oral discourse manifestations. We believe that the case studies presented will shed necessary light on the politeness perceived not only at the individual, but also at the group level. Although, to date, there have been numerous publications focusing on linguistic politeness, these were able to provide but a segment of a whole (e.g. favoured linguistic structures in applying politeness strategies in a particular group).

The present doctoral thesis consists of **six chapters.**

Chapter I includes the presentation of the main objectives and coordinates of the paper, its research methodology and it also provides an overview of the politeness phenomenon providing much needed definitions of basic theoretical concepts.

Chapter II, called *Theoretical Perspectives on the Politeness Phenomenon*, pragmatically

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[2] Jenny Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics,* London, Longman, 1995, p. 158.

contextualizes politeness offering definitions, explanations and descriptions of its main approaches as a sociolinguistic and pragmatic phenomenon. Starting with Grice's Cooperative Principle, we will focus on the most important directions within the study of politeness phenomenon: The *Social Normative* approach, the *Conversational Maxims* perspective, the *Face-saving* view of politeness, the perspective of Conversational Contract and the Relational management approach; these approaches have shaped up politeness research in transforming it into a research area that is extremely well grounded theoretically and conceptually. Therefore, the above approaches are highly relevant for the study. We present the most remarkable contributions of the politeness researchers, defining the key terms and concepts that will be used in this thesis. We will analyse how politeness is related to interactions at individual and group level. Chapter II also makes an important connection with the management of interrelations that impact the quality of life of individuals and the groups or communities of practice they belong to. Impoliteness, the other important facet of politeness, is schematically introduced as it involves some twin processes that may become apparent in interactions.

Chapter III provides an insight into the politeness model of Penelope Brown & Stephen C. Levinson that constitutes the foundation of the study of modern politeness, substantiating the role that self-image has in understanding interactions and their corresponding goals. We analyze the most influential theory of politeness focussing on the concept of self-image / *face* as well as the strategies of positive and negative politeness that may induce its maintenance, saving or even its loss, bringing into discussion the *face threatening acts* (FTAs) which are inherent to any interaction individuals participate in whether in everyday or professional contexts. The *face* concept is also approached from a global perspective, moving from the emblematic interpretation given by Erving Goffman to the multifaceted perceptions of *face* associated with different cultures, environments and groups.

Chapter IV is called *Professional Discourse and Politeness* and it offers an overview of professional discourse, its distinctive features in the dynamic working environment introducing at the same time reasons lying behind the complexity of oral discourse engagement; it also features politeness as a powerful tool that fosters conflict avoidance and mediation of wants and needs interactants display in oral exchanges. We will analyze the concept of professional discourse by presenting an array of relevant definitions, fundamental constructs that are relevant in the context of our thesis insisting on some of its differentiating elements. Business communication and

politeness concept will be analyzed in terms of transactional and interactional discourse. This chapter also includes an overview of politeness research in Europe as we believe that this new area of research with its multiple nuances and controversies is becoming increasingly attractive for specialized researchers in Europe and worldwide. Some European particularities of politeness and the issues associated with the desire to promote national identity through politeness are also addressed.

Chapter V, *Oral Competence and Politeness*, provides the link between advanced oral competence and politeness being a binding chapter that makes the transition to the Case Studies 1 and 2 (Chapter 6), focusing on oral speech in the context of a multilingual workplace and the specific tasks and responsibilities associated with it. We document the profile of the oral discourse user which this thesis concentrates on; we also revise the more relevant characteristics of oral speech as an extremely private and dynamic manifestation of professional discourse, pointing out some aspects that lead to the well accepted difficulty being proficient in a modern language while transmitting the message politely. We will make the connection between politeness and oral discourse bringing onto the discussion table the role that the concepts of *power* and *status* have in interactions individuals regularly participate in.

Chapter VI represents the practical application of our thesis and includes Case study 1 (*Politeness and Teachers*) and Case study 2 (*Politeness and Students*) offering an interpretation of the results of the quantitative and qualitative research of the politeness concept as it is perceived by the selected target groups. We insisted on the description of the subjects' profile, the context in which they have been analysed and the methodology used to achieve the set objectives. Case Study 1 includes the interpretation of the data obtained after administering a questionnaire on pragmatic politeness and on the complex ways in which it influences oral interactions between professors and students in academic environment. The sample consists of 55 teachers of modern languages activating at higher education level. Case Study 2, on the other hand, presents the qualitative interpretation of the views expressed by a representative sample of students who have answered a series of 30 questions on manifestations of politeness, as well as the interpretation of its role in their daily and professional life.

The paper ends with a section devoted to the *Thesis Conclusions* that we have drawn from our research. We have also included in this section of the paper a summary of the most important points of view presented in each chapter of the thesis which are accompanied by the appropriate

conclusions for each of the corresponding six chapters; suggestions for potential future research directions and the importance and novelty brought forward by our investigation are included in this part of the dissertation.

The significance of the study is - in our opinion - one worthy of consideration in the complex context of higher education in a European university in which multilingualism and multiculturalism play an important role. The results of the present study - in our opinion - may present theoretical and practical interest for researchers and practitioners in the field of sociolinguistic and pragmatic politeness, for teachers who appreciate the benefits of engaging in oral discourse activities, modern language educators, professionals in various fields of connected to professional communication and decision makers within academic instruction.

4. Research methodology

With reference to the methodology used in the practical application of the work, we have chosen a bi-dimensional mixed investigative method combining qualitative with quantitative research. In our first Case study, we have administered questionnaires to 55 modern language teachers in order to obtain data on their perception of the importance attached to politeness in the oral interactions they participate in; we have also sought to identify a set of variables whose analysis has generated the interest for the purpose of this study.

As related to the second Case study the research objective has been to obtain qualitative data through face to face discussions that have resulted from organising the semi controlled opinion interviews with students belonging to the Faculty of European Studies and the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration. We have thoroughly analysed their answers to questions included in an interview protocol that has followed some well-specified coordinates leading to extremely interesting interpretations of politeness under certain categories of analysis.

The benefits of the use of these particular research methods, the underlying reasons behind the decision, the thorough description of the target groups and the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained are presented in Chapter 6 (*case studies 1 and 2*) of this thesis.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for further research

The researcher's interests have been and are constantly focused on developing

communicative competences that offer educators and students within academic language instruction the possibility of becoming valuable participants in their oral interactions with other goal-driven discourse participants. Socio-pragmatic skills underlie one's training as an effective specialist and communicator altering the quality of the relationships we create at work and in our personal lives.

Our interest in the role of politeness theory in this equation is the basis of the present doctoral project that will enhance my own training as a teacher and a professional. The practical applications that have been introduced and analysed will help me optimize the quality of teaching – learning process I participate in within the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, "Babes-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca.

In her *Introduction* to the chapter entitled *Theories of Politeness*, Jenny Thomas has noted that over the past twenty years of pragmatic language research, such an increasing interest has been recorded in relation to studying the phenomenon of politeness that *the politeness theory may be seen as a sub-discipline of pragmatics*.[3] On virtually the same note, in his *Preface* of his highly acclaimed study emblematically entitled *Politeness* the outstanding politeness researcher Richard J. Watts (2003) has admitted with a hint of (British) humour that "*writing the Introduction to politeness is like being in mortal combat with a many-headed hydra. You have barely severed one head that a few more grow in its place*".[4] Thus, Watts made reference to the impressive research literature on the issue of politeness.

We join Richard Watts in the above mentioned opinion stating the generosity of approaches and interpretations of the phenomenon of politeness to date. It is a complex construct and a highly difficult area to define precisely because of the multitude of points of view expressed. Therefore, in this thesis we have chosen to contextualise an interpretation of politeness by connecting it to the social-inclusive approach of the relational management at a specific level of analysis. However, hereof, some limitations of the study may also result. Although our goal was not to analyze linguistic sequences of politeness, future research might focus on such priority. Other areas of interest might be represented by studies meant to assess issues related to

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[3] Jenny Thomas, *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*, London, Longman, 1995, p. 149.

[4] RICHARD J. WATTS, *POLITENESS*, CAMBRIDGE, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003, P. 2.: *WRITING THE INTRODUCTION TO POLITENESS IS LIKE BEING IN MORTAL COMBAT WITH A MANY-HEADED HYDRA. YOU HAVE BARELY*

the authentic manifestation of interactions at the work place by analysing the intricate ways oral discourse and politeness may overlap or diverge in business communication. Differences and similarities of pragmatic politeness may be a practical goal for future cross-cultural studies that involve, for example, students of a different nationality (not Romanian) who are part of different exchange opportunities and study at "Babeş-Bolyai" University.

In what concerns the applicability of the present paper, we consider our approach as one that may be useful to the professionals in the field of communication, pragmatics, sciences of education, sociology or sociolinguistics. Politeness animates human relations transforming communication into interactions that encourage social harmony. Hypocrisy, lack of honesty or projecting false points of view through manipulation represent (im)politeness strategies that may certainly be used in interactions in promoting one's self-image individually or professionally. However, in our opinion, in situations that involve real interactants in authentic contexts the strategies mentioned above may not create or enforce long-term benefits. Self-esteem, positive self-image and overall individual and group well-being are bound to be affected. Politeness thus becomes the interface between the *individual* and *the others* as the unique act of manifestation and declaration of honest objectives for moral survival.

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