



**SooHo Song**

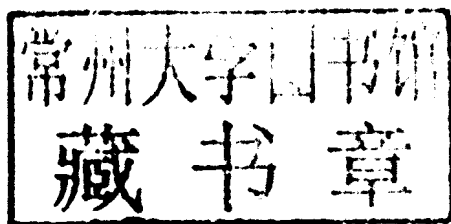
**politeness**

**and culture in  
second language acquisition**

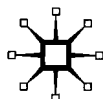


# Politeness and Culture in Second Language Acquisition

SooHo Song  
*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA*



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# Politeness and Culture in Second Language Acquisition

*To my parents, Jae Shik Song and Wan Hee Lee, who have given me unlimited support throughout my life*

# Preface

A nineteenth-century American philosopher, Amos Bronson Alcott, wrote: 'That is a good book which is opened with expectation, and closed with profit.'<sup>1</sup> I hope you have opened this book with expectation and will close it with profit. The reason that I hope you opened it with expectation is that its title, *Politeness and Culture in Second Language Acquisition*, gives you a good idea what it is all about. Politeness and culture are two critical elements in intercultural communication, which is an important part of our lives today. I also hope that you close this book with profit because it has shown you that cultural differences affect perception and expression of politeness. In other words, it tells you why learning a foreign culture is important when learning a foreign language, meaning that learning a second language extends beyond familiarizing yourself with the rules and conventions of the language. Instead, it involves educating yourself about the people who use the language.

It is obvious that we are living in an era of globalization. Without foreign products or services, our everyday life does not seem possible. There is a good chance that the coffee we drink in the morning, the clothes and shoes we wear, the car we drive to go to work, and the computers we use in our offices were imported from foreign countries. More than a fifth of products and services produced in the world now cross national borders. Nations focus on their international comparative advantage to maximize the benefits of international division of labor, which pushes globalization further. Moreover, thanks to technological progress in transportation, travel abroad has become much easier than ever before, and people travel all over the world. In fact, immigration has become one of the characteristics of modern life. As a result, it is easy to find various kinds of ethnic food restaurants wherever we go. Globalization has brought in all these changes, and intercultural communication has become an integral part of our daily life. Thus, the ability to communicate in a foreign language without trouble has become a very important skill, and understanding politeness in a specific culture is crucial for successful dialogue. This is the reason that in this book I explore the role of culture in intercultural communication in the context of politeness.

Politeness is the subject that I have been interested in throughout my academic career. If people are polite to each other, we are likely to have

fewer conflicts and arguments. In fact, if nations were polite to each other, the world might be a lot more peaceful than it is now. To me, politeness seems to be the key to perpetual peace at any level. Politeness is more important than ever now that we are living in an era of globalization. It is imperative to understand the perception and expression of politeness in order to facilitate smooth communication between different nations and cultures. For this reason, it is my hope that this book makes a good contribution to studying politeness in intercultural communication in the context of second language.

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# 1

## Introduction: Why Politeness Matters

Humans, unlike animals, use language to communicate with each other. Through language, humans make their demands known to others, express their feelings, articulate their opinions on various issues, and negotiate with opponents to avoid confrontation in case of conflict. The process of communication is a crucially important part of human life because human society requires personal interactions. In the communication process, both speaking and understanding play a significant role in avoiding miscommunication. Thus, for smooth communication, speakers need to have both a good grasp of the grammatical rules of the language they are using and an understanding of the culture that language grows out of – on the grounds that cultural norms influence language conventions.<sup>1</sup> Language acquisition requires the learner to have both organizational and contextual knowledge of the language being studied to become a good speaker of that language.

Organizational knowledge refers to the formal structure and rules of the language; it is grammatical and textual knowledge. It signifies ‘the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions’ (Leech, 1983, p. 11). In other words, it describes the technical rules of the language, known as *pragmalinguistics*, employed to properly express what the speaker wants to communicate to the hearer (Yu, 2006). Without this organizational knowledge communication in the language becomes extremely difficult.

Contextual knowledge, on the other hand, involves using a language in various situations and circumstances. It defines the way in which pragmatic performance is subject to specific socio-cultural conventions and values, such as traditions, customs, and social norms (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). Every society has its own ethnocentric and/or linguistic norms describing society’s implicit agreement that a certain

type of language should be used in certain circumstances, having to do with choice of words, verbal conjugation, the use of certain expressions, and so on. Thus, contextual knowledge, known as *sociopragmatics*, is based on lexical and functional knowledge of the language (Yu, 2006). Sociopragmatics facilitate smooth communication, reducing the chance for misunderstanding or miscommunication.

Communication, however, involves at least two people (or parties) because it is a product of exchanging speech acts, and thus involves both speaking and comprehending. According to Blum-Kulka and Olstein (1984), there are three types of variability that affect the realization of the speech act in communication: (1) *intra-cultural, situational variability*, which refers to the understanding of cultural norms in various situations, because different situations require different customs and/or conventions even within the same culture; (2) *cross-cultural variability*, which describes the differences among various cultures resulting from distinctions in cultural norms; and (3) *individual variability*, the unique communication behavior of each individual. Individual variability may be handled by getting to know the person better.

However, the first two types of variability (intra-cultural situational and cross-cultural) are hard to manage without an understanding of the culture. This is why Hymes (1974) contends that to have communicative competence in a language, speakers must have knowledge of the cultural rules for speaking as well as the technical linguistic features of the language. In other words, good communication is obtained when both the speaker and the hearer are on the same page with respect to the rules and conventions of the language in use and the culture behind it.

For this reason, Canale and Swain (1980) and later Canale (1983) argue that there are four competences for attaining communicative competence: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic. *Grammatical competence* means knowing the language rules, such as sentence order. *Discourse competence* refers to knowledge of the conventions that direct the relationship among sentences to form a meaning. *Sociolinguistic competence* is the ability to understand the pragmatic, socio-cultural elements that determine language use. Finally, *strategic competence* is how well the speaker manipulates language to achieve communication goals. To reach a desirable level of communicative competence in a foreign language, all four components are necessary.

As discussed above, the importance of contextual knowledge (socio-cultural understanding) for smooth communication in a second language has been repeatedly emphasized in the literature and is one of

the primary reasons communication between different cultures using a second language is challenging. Foreign or second language learners often lack knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules of language in use as well as of the rules of grammar. When a nonnative speaker tries to communicate with a native speaker, lack of contextual knowledge may complicate the communication process and lead to miscommunication and/or misunderstanding. For instance, mastery of linguistic forms without sociolinguistic understanding can lead to misunderstandings or even offense because they can understand only the literal meaning of the words and do not comprehend the sociolinguistic rules for interpreting the words. This is the reason that even advanced foreign or second language learners sometimes cause cross-cultural misunderstandings because they don't always know when to use certain words or phrases and under what circumstances (Yu, 2006).

For foreign or second language learners to become good speakers of a language, they need to go through a process of *language socialization*, which Ochs (1996, p. 408) defines as 'the process whereby children and other novices are socialized through language, part of such socialization being a socialization to use language meaningfully, appropriately, and effectively.' In other words, to obtain a foreign language proficiency, they need to understand what social norms and ideas are behind the conventions of the language use, meaning that sociolinguistic competence is required for a language proficiency.

According to Yu (2006), there are two areas of sociolinguistic competence: appropriateness of form and appropriateness of meaning. The former refers to pragmalinguistics, which signals 'the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions' (Leech, 1983: 11). The latter focuses on sociopragmatics, which describe how socio-cultural conventions and values affect pragmatic performance (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993). Without these two areas of sociolinguistic competence, cross-cultural realization of communicative acts may result in failure.

Because of the importance of understanding cultural norms in developing a good command of a language, considerable attention has been paid to communicative competence with pragmatic knowledge in second language acquisition. Studies have shown that nonnative speakers often experience misunderstandings or miscommunications in the cross-cultural realization of communicative acts because of the lack of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence, in addition to the lack of contextual knowledge (e.g. Lightbown and Spada, 1990; Omaggio, 2001; Savignon, 1983; Yu, 2006).

Among the many cultural aspects of second language acquisition, politeness has received much scholarly attention, because politeness is a linguistic action with social realization and cultural implications. Many scholars agree that the major goal of using a certain phrase to express politeness is to strategically avoid conflicts and to shun devaluation by others (e.g. Kasper, 1990; Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Fraser and Nolen, 1981; Leech, 1983; Reiter, 2000; Watts, 2003).

Previous studies on politeness have presented various rules and theories (e.g. Searle, 1975; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1977, 1983; Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Coulmas, 1981; Kasper, 1990; Fraser, 1990). For instance, Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) argue that speech acts show differences of language mode in both conceptualization and realization across languages and cultures, mainly motivated by differences in deep-stated cultural conventions and assumptions. They argue that since politeness conventions may differ from one culture to another, the concept of politeness needs to be refined based on culture. Each society has its own social norms because different culture prioritize different values. Social norms typically consist of rules prescribing a certain behavior and way of thinking widely accepted in the same context. Differences in appreciation and expressions of politeness among various cultures may lead speakers to choose different expressions according to their cultural values.

Siegal (1994, 1995) emphasizes the importance of social attributes in verbal interaction across socio-cultural contexts. Language learners should know and fulfill the social expectations of appropriate politeness within each culture. According to Fraser (1990, p. 220), politeness arises 'when an action is in congruence with the (socio-cultural) norms'. On the other hand, impoliteness is the result of violation of the social contract, which may occur when there is a lack of understanding of the norms (Fraser and Nolen, 1981).

In a cross-cultural study, Hill et al. (1986) report that there is a difference in the focus of verbal politeness between Western and Eastern cultures. For instance, verbal politeness in an American or Swedish cultural framework is motivated by volition more than discernment, whereas Japanese verbal politeness shows a preponderance of the discernment strategy. Yum (1988) also asserts that American communication emphasizes how speakers can formulate a passage better to improve credibility and polish their speech delivery skills, while communication in East Asian culture is oriented more toward the receiver or hearer. In another study, Ide (1989) similarly finds that Western languages rely more on strategic politeness and less on discernment. East Asian languages are the opposite because of linguistic and/or cultural differences.

Although politeness is an important part of pragmatic expression and communication in all languages, differences in appreciation and expressions of politeness among various cultures may lead speakers to choose different expressions according to their cultural values. However, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that regardless of culture, politeness utterances are based on contextually expected concerns for face, which they refer to as 'weightiness'. According to them, politeness weightiness is universally applicable and determined by the distance (familiarity) between the communicators, relative power of the speaker and the hearer, and the imposition of the task.

According to Eelen (2001), the most influential theory of politeness is Brown and Levinson's (1987), which triggered numerous reactions, applications, and critiques (e.g. Bilbow, 1995; Macauley, 1995; O'Driscoll, 1996; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997; Lee-Wong, 1998). A number of scholars have described the Brown and Levinson theory as the cornerstone of the politeness literature. For example, Eelen (2001 : 3) wrote, 'The name Brown and Levinson have become almost synonymous with the word "politeness" itself.' Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1997: 11) wrote, 'It is impossible to talk about it [politeness] without referring to Brown and Levinson's theory.'

Despite its influence on and contribution to the literature on politeness, the Brown and Levinson theory has a significant weakness. It overlooks the importance of culture in intercultural communication, even though scholars have shown that cultural understanding is critical for communicative competence. Considering that expression and perception of politeness is part of communication, this weakness does not seem negligible.

As previously mentioned, the Brown and Levinson theory of politeness is based on three factors: (1) distance (familiarity) between the communicators; (2) relative power between the speaker and the hearer; and (3) the imposition of the task. These factors are critical to a speaker's decision of weightiness. However, they are not likely to have the same effects on culturally different verbal expressions (and perceptions) of politeness. For instance, an old man and a young boy in East Asia cannot be friends because of the hierarchical nature of the culture, but such friendship is possible in Western culture. In other words, distance and the relative power between the communicators are likely to vary according to the cultural values of each. As Hymes (1986) points out, the application of politeness universals in speech communication acts may be limited once cultural differences are incorporated and the superficial similarities of various cultures are removed.

In this study, I investigate the role of culture in the speaker's perception (and expression) of weightiness in selecting a politeness strategy. Considering that there are cultural differences in how politeness is expressed over various regions and cultures, it is meaningful to study how the differences (Western vs. East Asian) appear in the expression of politeness in the context of *Interlanguage* (a term coined by Selinker (1972) to describe the influence of native language in the second language acquisition process; see Chapter 2). Previous studies have addressed this issue only in the context of their own language, not in the context of Interlanguage.

The contribution of this study is threefold: it (1) refines and expands the Brown and Levinson theory incorporating cultural differences; (2) empirically tests Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory using subjects from different cultural backgrounds; and (3) studies the impact of Interlanguage on expressing politeness in the context of different cultures. While the Brown and Levinson (1987) theory has been widely tested, this study is the first to quantitatively test the theory using subjects with different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) has been tested only in a native language context. By using second language learners, I investigated how Interlanguage interferes with the perception and expression of politeness. Finally, Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal politeness theory overlooks the importance of cultural difference in politeness speech acts. By incorporating culture into the formal model of Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal politeness theory, I refine and expand the theory.

In this book, I raise the following questions. What is the role of culture in the speaker's perception of weightiness in selecting a politeness strategy? Do cultural differences matter in selecting politeness strategies in communication behavior? Do these differences have an impact on second language learners' expressions of politeness? To find answers to these questions, I use the factors included in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory concerning the determinants of weightiness to prove different degrees of impact on weightiness according to the culture. In other words, incorporating the role of cultural differences into Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory refines the theory and increases its applicability across cultures.

The findings of this study help us better understand politeness expressions in foreign language communication, how second language learners' expressions of politeness differ from those of native speakers, and what causes these differences. The results of this study also have meaningful

implications in understanding the Interlanguage pragmatics of nonnative language learners.

## **Organization of the book**

This book consists of five chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical background of the research question. I provide a thorough review of the extant literature in the relevant fields and tie them into this book. The fields whose literature I review include second language acquisition with native language influence, theoretical perspectives and socio-cultural aspects of politeness speech acts (including Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal theory on politeness), patterns and types of politeness expressions, and socio-cultural values in the Korean culture with respect to expressing politeness.

In the third chapter, 'Research Design', I describe the data collection method and process as well as the statistical analysis employed in the study. Since this book conducts an empirical test of both the original version and the revised and improved version of Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal theory on politeness, I explain in detail the process of data collection, the characteristics of the subjects who participated in the survey, and the statistical test used in the study.

The fourth chapter, 'Findings', reports the results of the empirical analysis. The results include a statistical analysis result of all the samples (both American and Korean subjects) and two separate analyses of Korean and American subjects. Also included is a qualitative analysis I conducted to show how differences in the cultural backgrounds of the subjects affect expressions of politeness. Findings of the qualitative analysis supplement the statistical analysis.

In the fifth and final chapter, I summarize the study and discuss the implications of the findings. I will also discuss the contribution of this book to the study of second language acquisition and the relationship between socio-cultural difference and politeness expression.



# 2

## Theories of Politeness

In this chapter, I review the extant literature relevant to the research question, including the impact of the native language on second language acquisition; theoretical perspectives on politeness, including Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal theory on politeness; socio-cultural aspects of politeness; politeness patterns; strategic politeness, including indirectness in speech acts for politeness expression; discernment politeness concerning the social relationship between the speaker and the hearer; the pre-patterned speech view of politeness; and the politeness system and socio-cultural values in Korea.

The reasons I survey the literature in all these fields are as follows. First, because the book deals with the effects of cultural differences on politeness expressions and perceptions in native and second language usage. Interlanguage and second language acquisition, in addition to politeness, are important parts of the theoretical background. By reviewing the evolution of the theory on politeness, Interlanguage, and second language acquisition in the extant literature, we can see how our understanding of these subjects has improved over time. At the same time, such a review also raises questions because there are a lot of questions left to be answered.

Second, I also review the socio-cultural aspect of politeness theories because I empirically test Brown and Levinson's (1987) argument on the universal nature of the politeness theory. My argument is that although their theory and formal model may be applicable to all cultures and societies, the degree of applicability may vary due to cultural differences. I review the literature on the role of culture in communication and speech acts.

Finally, I survey the literature on the Korean politeness system and Korean socio-cultural values because my study deals with Interlanguage