POLITENESS PHENOMENA IN ENGLAND AND GREECE

A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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If these acknowledgements sound too conventional it is only because I lack more appropriate words to express my real feelings. This book has benefited greatly from all those acknowledged here as well as from many others too numerous to mention, but of course all faults and inadequacies which remain are entirely my own.

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

The great majority of the examples employed in the text come from the data, and to facilitate the reader's tracing of their sources I have used the following notation: for plays, the initial(s) of the name of the author are given, followed by the number of the play (the details of which are found in Appendix I) and the page number. Thus, if what follows the example is [E.1: 40] it means that the example is taken from 'Efthemiades' first play, page 40'. Similarly, [Q.5: S.1] means 'questionnaire, number 5, situation 1' and [NB] means that the example is taken from my 'notebook'. The Greek examples are given in Latin characters. I have, however, used the Greek characters γ (velar voiced fricative), δ (interdental voiced fricative), θ (interdental voiceless fricative), and χ (voiceless velar fricative) which best render the equivalent Greek sounds. Greek examples are followed by a word-for-word or freer translation according to what was thought the best rendition of the case under discussion; all translations are mine. A few examples are invented, mostly in cases where a convenient illustration on the issue discussed was needed. These examples bear no label. An asterisk against a word or phrase indicates an ungrammatical or unacceptable form.

CONTENTS

1
Introduction

1.1 CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Despite the great significance of 'politeness', it is only in recent years that this concept has become a major issue in linguistics. This is evidenced in the vast array of publications which followed Brown and Levinson's (1978) original extended essay on politeness phenomena, including both confirming and disconfirming findings for their theory. In fact, it was probably this wave of renewed interest which led to the republication in 1987 of the same essay, now accompanied by an extensive introduction. This introduction critically examines all relevant subsequent research, and concludes with Brown and Levinson's conviction that broadly speaking their initial findings still appear to be justified. Interestingly enough, this reissue coincided with the establishment of 2 October as 'National Courtesy Day' in England. This growing interest in and continuing development of the theory of politeness clearly point to the importance of the issue in human interaction and, consequently, in the study of language in its social context.

The research presented here has been motivated by a general concern for the study of the principles underlying interaction in cross-cultural contexts and has been inspired by the work of Brown and Levinson, exploring mainly their distinction between 'positive' and 'negative' politeness. It is this work, together with a brief review of the relevant literature on interaction and politeness, which is presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the concept of politeness and discusses the extent to which it is universal. Examples from a variety of cultures are included which indicate that differences in the conceptualization of politeness are reflected in all levels of the linguistic code. Finally, this chapter focuses on social deixis and forms of address which perhaps constitute the most transparent indices of socio-cultural influence on language use. Chapter 4 examines various verbal and non-verbal aspects of politeness and

attempts to define the concept itself and to investigate how it is visualized in Greek and English cultures.

Politeness phenomena are, however, inevitably reflected in language. Consequently, special emphasis has been given to the analysis and interpretation of the realization patterns of requests. Requests were chosen mainly because of their intrinsic reflection of the expression of politeness and their wide, everyday applicability to a variety of situations, thus offering grounds for an extensive analysis of the theory as it applies to specific languages. This analysis is what constitutes Chapters 5, 6, and 7 and is perhaps the main contribution of this study. Chapter 5 also includes an examination of indirectness and its relationship to politeness. Chapter 6 deals with request constructions, whereas Chapter 7 concentrates on their modification. The main hypothesis is that politeness is conceptualized differently and, thus, manifested differently in the two societies; more specifically that Greeks tend to use more positive politeness devices than the English, who prefer more negative politeness devices.

Although the study may appear to be exclusively concerned with the description and comparison of the Greek and the English cultural and linguistic systems, this analysis is intended to serve as an explicit illustration of and support for the more general claim that, despite popular stereotypes, no nation may be objectively verified as more or less polite than any other, but only polite in a different, culturally specific way.

Furthermore, this attempt to investigate the sources of stereotypic comments classifying societies according to degrees of politeness will, hopefully, be of value to all those involved in human interaction. These include not only scholars with particular interests in the study of language use in its socio-cultural context, but also foreign language educators, in fact, everybody who lives and interacts with others, whether native or non-native speakers. As cross-cultural communication continues to increase, it is crucial that native users of all languages become more sensitized to the fact that different languages, because they are integral parts of their respective socio-cultural systems, construct messages and express feelings in different ways which are not less logical than one's own. To this end, examples from a variety of cultures and subcultures are included. Chapter 8 discusses some applications of this work for

language teaching and learning, and suggests some broader implications for further research.

The comparative approach in cross-cultural study is that advocated by Hymes (1972*c*: 36). Similarly, as Saville-Troike (1982: 4) quite rightly points out, one of the best ways of coming to an understanding of one's own 'ways of speaking' is by comparing and contrasting these ways with those of others; this process soon reveals that what we normally assume to be 'natural' or 'logical' communicative practices are just as unique and conventional to their particular culture as the language code itself. A comparative approach, then, to a subject such as politeness seems inevitable, and my concern here is both comparative and descriptive.

The main focus of the study is linguistic, though not in its narrow sense. It draws from areas such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and the ethnography of speaking, mainly because a topic such as politeness cannot be adequately handled within a narrowly defined linguistic model. Politeness is a social as well as a linguistic phenomenon, and ignoring either of these two equally basic aspects cannot be justified.

Finally the question of methodology employed in the research requires some comment, but as we shall see, although the issues of data collection and their treatment are extremely controversial, there appears to be no strong evidence which singles out one method as superior to any other.

1.2 DATA FOR THE STUDY OF POLITENESS

1.2.1 *Introduction*

Data collection and analysis in sociolinguistics has been a highly controversial issue.[1] It is understandable and justifiable for scholars to adhere to varying and even contrasting methodologies in their investigation of language, due to their training and school of thought; but to condemn one approach entirely and present and support another as the only scientifically justifiable one is unrealistic. As Brown and Yule (1983: 270) maintain, 'there is a dangerous

[1] See, for instance, Labov (1972*a* and 1972*b*); Wolfson (1976); and Stubbs (1983); among others.

tendency, among established scholars as among students, to hope that a particular line of approach will yield "the truth" about a problem. It is very easy to make claims which are too general and too strong.'

For instance, Wolfson (1983: 95) claims that 'ethnographic fieldwork is the only reliable method of collecting data about the way speech acts function in interaction'. However, as Labov (1972*b*: 119) suggests, 'it is not necessary for everybody to use the same methods—indeed, it is far better if we do not'.

Another issue which arises is what constitutes natural speech. Wolfson (1976: 202), for instance, argues that no single, absolute entity answers to the notion of natural/casual speech, or as Stubbs (1983: 225) says: 'the hunt for pure, natural or authentic data is a chimera'. 'If speech is felt to be appropriate to a situation and the goal, then it is natural in that context' (Wolfson, 1976: 202). This is exactly what we want to study: what people regard as appropriate speech in different situations.

Linguists are, I suppose, lucky in that the object of their research is all around them, and perhaps unlucky in that this very advantage can become burdensome if they always have their minds switched on to record what happens verbally around them. Speech analysts cannot ignore this inundation of continuous, actual manifestations, but nor can they ignore either their own intuitions or those of other native speakers nor yet the data collected in experimental situations and/or from literary sources. Moreover, any corpus, no matter how long, may lack some cases which can be revealed by intuition. However, intuitive data also have limitations.[2]

The problems associated with recording and transcription of data are discussed in detail by Stubbs (1983), Chaika (1982), and Labov (1972*b*). These problems may vary from the time- and money-consuming procedures involved to the 'principle of formality', in which the participants tend to become more formal in their speech. These considerations, together with the possibility of shyness and embarrassment, introduce the question of what Labov (1972*b*: 113) calls the 'observer's paradox'—observing 'how people speak when they are not being observed'. Naturally, this last difficulty can be surpassed under certain circumstances by the use of hidden tape recorders and similar devices, provided, of course,

[2] See, for instance, Labov (1966); and Gumperz and Hymes (1972).

that participants are asked for their consent before such data are published (Tannen, 1984*a*).

Like Kramer (1975: 199), who argues for an increased sense of certitude based on several approaches, Wolfson (1976), Stubbs (1983), and Labov (1972*b*) also stress the advantages of a multiple-source approach. They maintain that data so acquired can, when properly interpreted and combined, be used 'to converge on right answers to hard questions'—Labov's (ibid. 119) 'principle of convergence' and Stubbs's (1983: 235) 'triangulation'.

In my own work I, too, have concluded that we can profit from the advantages of one method while overcoming the limitations of another, and have, therefore, attempted to collect data from a variety of sources. These include mainly literature, but also discourse completion tests, reports, and discussions with informants and friends. I also used my intuitions and personal experience as a life-time member of Greek society and a long-time participant in English society. Finally, following the ethnographic approach, I carefully wrote down occurrences of situations and patterns I found interesting, provoking discussions and interpretations from the people involved, wherever possible.

1.2.2 *Drama*

Here, the main source of my data has been literature, and plays in particular. Following the recommendations of a specialist in Greek and English literature, I chose a number of plays by ten English and ten Greek contemporary playwrights, both men and women (see Appendix I). Because of their varying lengths, I finally selected forty-four Greek plays but only twenty English ones. These I read carefully in an effort to collect a number of speech acts, including requests, compliments, apologies, and so on. In addition, because I felt that translations of these works in the languages under consideration might also prove useful sources of linguistic insights, I looked through all the translations available.

I firmly believe that literature, particularly plays, can be a valuable source of data for sociolinguistic research. Modern literature is a mirror of society and as such it reflects and portrays a great variety of people from different social backgrounds. Not only does it reveal their use of language in a variety of situations given in context, but also their attitudes and values about language itself.

This kind of extensive variation is very difficult to capture in any manageable corpus of fieldwork data.

It has been suggested by Vine (1975: 357) that in order fully to understand what goes on in face-to-face interaction, besides all the other factors involved, 'additional contextual factors, such as the histories of the interactors and their past encounters, their immediate and future goals, the cultural definition of the interaction situation' should be taken into consideration. Any observation and recording of particular speech situations will be inadequate in providing this sort of information, unless the researcher is an insider, whereas in a play this is often amply delineated.

Such a rich source of data has not been exploited very extensively so far, mainly because of prejudices against the practice of those linguists who relied heavily on their intuitions to unravel and explain the rules underlying the verbal behaviour of native speakers. This reaction seems to have led to the other extreme: rejection of any data which is not 'naturally occurring speech'. There are of course exceptions; for instance, Burton (1980: Chapter 5) argues strongly for literary data and also mentions others, notably Goffman, Webb *et al.*, Ray, and Brown and Gilman, who implicitly or explicitly share the view that literature can be used as a source of sociological and sociolinguistic data. Edwards, Trudgill, and Weltens (1984: 8) share the view that dialect literature is worthy of consideration in dialect studies.

Obviously, the chief characteristic of literature is that it is written, as opposed to actual spoken discourse. Therefore, two questions arise. First, can we draw a clear-cut distinction between the written and the oral modes of communication? And second, if such a clear distinction can be drawn, can plays be considered real representatives of the written mode? Although Hymes (1986: 50) provides an affirmative answer to the first, he does so with the reservation that such dichotomies should be relied on only with great discretion since they stem from prejudices and, thus, invite unfair evaluations. As far as the second question is concerned, a moment's reflection will reveal that plays are not really an example of the written mode, because they are obviously intended to be performed (spoken) rather than to be read. Many plays have never even been published, and the fact that many others have should not be misinterpreted. Their appearance in written form serves more or less the same purpose as transcriptions of recorded materials; that