

Looking Beyond the Form of Linguistic Presentation: Approach to Politeness across Cultures

PAN, YULING

United States Census Bureau, E-Mail: yuling.pan@census.gov

Keynote Speech Abstract

Brown and Levinson's influential work on politeness (1978, 1987) has generated much interest among researchers who study politeness as an area in pragmatics. In the last three decades since the publication of Brown and Levinson's work, almost every aspect of Brown and Levinson's politeness model has been examined, applied, contested, challenged, or modified (e.g., Eelen 2001, Mills 2003). The theoretical inquiries on politeness have resulted in huge amount of empirical research and have shed light on the concepts of politeness and face within and across language and cultural boundaries. In spite of rich investigations of the theoretical aspects of politeness, methodological issues in politeness research have been somewhat neglected, particularly research on methodologies for the study politeness across cultures. As many researchers rightly point out, the Brown and Levinson's politeness model is based on the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The starting point, as well as the focus, of this Anglo-Saxon tradition is the individual or the Model Speaker, in a Brown and Levinson's sense. This focal point has anchored politeness research to concentrate on the linguistic manifestations of politeness, such as indirectness, speech acts, and conventional polite expressions.

When approaching politeness in different languages with this methodology, researchers are faced with the challenges that many linguistic features of politeness are either language-specific or situation-specific. It is difficult to draw convincing comparisons across cultures on the dimensions of politeness. For example, debates over Eastern and Western cultures on politeness behavior include the distinction of discernment politeness for Asian cultures and volitional politeness for Western cultures (e.g., Mastumoto 1988, 1989, Ide et al. 1992, Gu 1990, Mao 1992, 1994). This distinction was challenged through several arguments. One of the arguments is that the required polite behavior appropriate to the social interaction is not specific to Asian societies and that the dichotomous distinction between discernment and volitional politeness should be seen as a spectrum of possibilities (e.g., Watts 2003).

In this paper, I argue that theoretical debates over politeness should be better informed by sound research methodologies and that politeness theories have to be tempered by the idea that politeness is always situational. No absolutes are possible. So any analysis we do has to take the specific situation into account and be comparative across situations. In order to do so, we need to develop an analytical and methodological framework that accounts for cultural assumptions in human relationships and social requirements for interaction in a specific situation, as well as social variables called for in politeness theories. I call this a situation-oriented approach to the study of politeness across cultures.

A situation-oriented approach views politeness as linguistic strategies and discourse resources available to participants to employ in order to achieve certain interactional goals. Participants utilize these strategies and resources according to the situation, the participant's role, and the goal(s) of the interaction. In order to define politeness, we need, first of all, to define the situation of the interaction as politeness is other-oriented and situational. The fluid nature of politeness makes it subtle and elusive if the situation or the context of interaction is not taken into account in the analysis.

I will further illustrate this point by using findings from two multilingual projects. They are the "Professional Communication in International Settings" (PCIS) (Pan, Scollon and Scollon 2002) and the "Cross-cultural Communication Norms and Survey Interviews" (CCNSI) (Pan

2007, Pan et al. 2008). PCIS examines professional communication norms, as well as politeness norms, in three cultural settings: Beijing, Hong Kong, and Finland. From this project, we have developed a three-culture reflective model for analyzing professional communication across cultures. That is, we have analyzed not only the participants' behavior, but also the participants' reflection of themselves and perception of others.

CCNSI investigates the linguistic behavior in survey interviews of speakers across five language groups: English, Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Spanish. We have worked out a framework for comparing interviewees' linguistic behaviors, including linguistic politeness, across languages. We have conducted two kinds of analysis: analysis of interview transcripts and analysis of group members' perceptions of interviews as a communicative event. Similar to PCIS project, this project has built in a method of triangulation. That is, in addition to analyzing interview transcripts, we have conducted debriefing sessions with the interviewers in these language groups in order to obtain their perception of the interviewees' behavior.

Findings from these two projects demonstrate that politeness permeates every stage of interaction in professional and institutional communication. However, at the same time, it is subject to change according to the social requirements and communication norms of the situation. It is also subject to the evaluation and judgment of participants in a given situation. What is considered polite by one language group may be considered impolite by another group. What is deemed appropriate in one situation may be seen as inappropriate in another. The seemingly inconsistency of politeness often leads analysis or comparison to fall into binary oppositions and stereotyping.

These projects suggest that a more systematic way to study politeness across cultures should start with the analysis of the interactional situation. This analysis includes identifying some fundamental and underlying cultural norms for polite behavior, including expectations for polite behavior in a given situation, followed by the analysis of the power structure, the source of power, and the interaction conventions in that situation. One method for this level of analysis is to study participants' perceptions and reflections of the situation by observing their actual action or behavior, combined with focus group or debriefing discussions. After this level of analysis is completed, the linguistic analysis of politeness will be plausible and comparable. This approach thus incorporates the methodology of the ethnography of communication with interactional sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

I will conclude the paper by stating that a situation-oriented approach to politeness is not only a methodological position, but also a theoretical position. The methodological issues will inform theoretical notions. Moving away from the linguistic presentation of politeness will help us better understand linguistic politeness.

References:

- Brown, P. & Levinson, S.C. (1978) 1987. *Politeness – Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eelen, G. 2001. *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome.
- Ide, Sachiko. 1989. "Formal forms and discernment: two neglected aspects of linguistic politeness." *Multilingua* 8(2/3): 223-48.
- Gu, Yueguo. 1990. "Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese." *Journal of Pragmatics*. 14 (2): 237-57.
- Mao, Luming. 1992. "Invitational discourse and Chinese identity." *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 3(1):70-96.
- Mao, Luming. 1994. "Beyond politeness theory: "face" revisited and renewed," *Journal of Pragmatics* 21(5):451-86.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 1988. "Reexamination of the universality of face: politeness phenomena in Japanese." *Journal of Pragmatics* 12(4):403-26.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko. 1989. "Politeness and conversational universals—observations from Japanese." *Multilingua* 8(2/3): 207-22
- Mills, Sara. 2003. *Gender and Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Pan, Yuling, Scollon, Suzanne and Ron Scollon. 2002. *Professional communication in international settings*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Pan, Yuling. 2007. "Cross-cultural Communication Norms and Survey Interviews." Paper presented at the Panel of "Chinese Institutional Discourse" for the 10th International Pragmatics Conference. Göteborg, Sweden. July 8-13.
- Pan, Yuling. 2008. "Cross-cultural Communication Norms and Survey Interviews." In Hao, S. and Kádár, D. (eds.) *It's the Dragon's Turn – Chinese Institutional Discourses*. Berne: Peter Lang.
- Pan, Yuling, Ashley Landreth, Alisu Schoua-Glusberg, Marjorie Hinsdale-Shouse, and Hyunjoo Park. 2008. "Cognitive Interviewing in non-English Languages: A Cross-cultural Perspective." Special Invited Paper for the International Conference on Survey Methods in Multinational, Multiregional and Multicultural Contexts. June 25-29, 2008, Berlin, Germany.
- Watts, Richard. 2003. *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.