



The Brown and Levinson theory revisited: A statistical analysis



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ABSTRACT

The Brown and Levinson (1987) theory posits that the combination of social distance, power ratio, and task imposition determine politeness weightiness perception regardless of the culture. In order to test the effects of culture, I conducted statistical analyses using subjects with American, East Asian, and Latin American cultural backgrounds. The results reveal that task imposition does not have a statistically significant impact on the speaker's determination of politeness weightiness in East Asia while it does in the US and Latin America.

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1. Introduction

Globalization has brought about an unprecedented increase of international trade and immigration flows. As a result, there are greater needs for cross-cultural communication today than ever before (Blommaert, 2010; Kecskes, 2013; Sifinaou, 2013).¹ To avoid any miscommunication or misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication, foreign language speakers need a good grasp of cultural understanding in addition to knowledge of the grammatical rules of the language. Accordingly, previous studies have emphasized the importance of cultural understanding in second language learning (e.g. Kecskes, 2013, 2015; Lin, 2009; Omaggio, 2001; Song, 2012).

Among the many aspects of cultural understanding, politeness has been widely studied as people want to avoid conflicts regardless of culture, and understanding politeness norms is critical to achieve that goal (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Kim, 2011; Reiter, 2000; Song, 2012; Watts, 2003). According to the extant literature, there are four groups of politeness theories: 1) a rhetorical universal/conversational maxim group (Searle, 1975; Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1977); 2) politeness as social and cultural construction (Coulmas, 1981; Kasper, 1990; Fraser, 1990; Ide, 1989; Blum-Kulka and House, 1989); 3) politeness as face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987)²; and 4) politeness with social constructivism (Eelen, 2001; Geyer, 2008; Haugh, 2007; Kadar and Haugh, 2013; Pizziconi, 2006; Watts, 2003).

Among them, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory has received significant scholarly attention due to its claim of being universal (Dickey, 2016: 197). The theory posits that politeness utterances are based on contextually expected

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¹ Some expect that globalization may lead to homogenization of the world due to the overwhelming influence of American culture, but Sifinaou (2013) does not find empirical evidence for this argument.

² Face is defined as, "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself." (Brown and Levinson, 1999: 311).

concerns for face, which they call politeness weightiness. The Brown and Levinson theory has been widely used in politeness studies and has received extensive empirical support (Dickey, 2016). Lindblom (2001: 1620) maintained, “I believe Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory is the most productively complex explication of the Cooperative Principle to date because it is a bi-perspectival account that uses the CP³ to describe discourse as utterance and as social interaction.”

At the same time, the Brown and Levinson theory has been criticized from multiple angles (Culpeper, 2011). One of them comes from social constructivism, which contends that politeness conventions vary from one culture to another and thus the concept of politeness needs to be redefined based on culture (Christie, 2007; Cook, 2011; Davis, 1998; Soltys et al., 2014). Song (2012) and O’Driscoll (2007) also argue that although the three factors included in the model provide a simple, concise theoretical framework and may be universally applicable, the effects of each factor are likely to vary across cultures in terms of the social perception and verbal expressions of politeness.

To refine the theory, in this paper, I add culture to Brown and Levinson’s universal politeness theory and empirically test it. The statistical analysis uses survey data from subjects with different cultural backgrounds (American, East Asian, and Latin American) and will provide empirical evidence for the universal applicability of the theory as well as the role of cultural differences in politeness weightiness perception.

2. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory

There are three assumptions in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory that are universally applicable regardless of culture, that are: 1) everyone has face; 2) any speech acts can threaten face; and 3) speakers attempt to minimize the threat by employing various linguistic strategies. The rationale for these assumptions is that speakers rationally select a strategy to maintain their face. In other words, rationality and face play a key role in determining a speech strategy in politeness expressions. Rationality here denotes the process of reasoning in choosing a politeness mode according to situations and goals (see Arundale, 2006).

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) argue that all politeness remarks contain the intention to be polite, which is a universal trait that appears in communication acts regardless of culture (see Davis, 1998). Unlike the universal principles by Grice (1975) and Leech (1977), Brown and Levinson (1987) include the interactive nature of communication that are universally practiced, such as conflict avoidance and face saving (Eelen, 2001; Gagne, 2010). Thus, Locher and Watts (2005: 9) claim that the Brown and Levinson theory mirrors the essential characteristics of “human socio-communicative verbal interaction” vis-à-vis politeness.

The Brown and Levinson (1987) theory posits that there are three factors that determine the level of politeness and the type of politeness strategy employed by the speaker: 1) the speaker’s perception of the social distance between the speaker and the hearer; 2) the speaker’s perception of the relative social power ratio between the communicators; and 3) the speaker’s perception of the imposition of the task/act. In other words, as the distance between the communicators increases and as the interlocutor becomes more powerful, the speaker’s perception of politeness weightiness increases. The speaker would also feel the same way as the seriousness of task imposition increases as well. The rationale behind this argument is that regardless of culture, these three factors affect the speaker’s decision on how polite the speaker needs to be to the hearer in his/her speech acts. Brown and Levinson (1987: 76) call these factors the speaker’s perception of politeness weightiness and formularize it as follows:

$$Wx = D(S,H) + P(S,H) + Rx$$

where Wx indicates the politeness weightiness perceived by the speaker x , meaning the level of threat to the speaker’s and/or hearer’s face perceived by the speaker, $D(S,H)$ represents the speaker’s perception of the distance between the speaker and the hearer, $P(S,H)$ denotes the speaker’s perception of the relative power ratio between the speaker and the hearer, and Rx denotes the speaker’s perception of the imposition of the task, meaning the degree of imposition felt by the speaker x to carry on the task.

Conceptually, the social distance, and the relative power ratio between the communicators, and the task imposition may affect the speaker’s perception regardless of cultural background. Yet, according to Eelen (2001), variables P and D reflect social structures and cultural norms, which may vary over different cultures. In fact, previous studies (e.g. Cook, 2011; Felix-Brasdefer, 2008; Fukushima, 2003; Gagne, 2010; Kecskes, 2015; Kim, 2011; Song, 2014) report that cultural differences affect politeness expressions. For example, Hill et al. (1986) and Yum (1988) have shown that American culture and East Asian culture emphasize different elements in politeness expressions. According to them, discernment politeness is widely used in East Asia while American English speakers tend to employ strategic politeness. Discernment politeness emphasizes the hearer’s status, and the speaker expresses his/her politeness using honorifics. By contrast, strategic politeness is based on the speaker’s volition; the speaker chooses how to express politeness using various strategies and/or modals rather than the hearer’s status.

³ CP stands for cooperative principle.

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