

The impact of globalisation on politeness and impoliteness

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Abstract

Globalisation tends to be perceived as one of the most powerful forces shaping today's world. In its simplest sense, globalisation refers to the acceleration of processes of interconnectedness in every aspect of social life. It is assumed that this will lead to the homogenisation of the world under the influence of the omnipresent American culture. However, since globalisation is a process rather than an end state, its consequences are contingent on various factors and are, therefore, uncertain and unpredictable.

Discourse practices fall within the heart of this interconnectedness not least because it entails various kinds of interaction. In this paper, I would like to consider if and to what extent globalisation affects the expression of politeness and impoliteness. I will draw my evidence from the service sector, primarily in Greece and in England. More specifically, I will consider issues of formality and informality and terms of address, drawing from naturally occurring data and research findings. Such evidence may offer indications as to the kinds of changes that increased interconnectedness may produce. Without denying the homogenising power of globalisation, it is argued that greater interconnectedness does not necessarily mean cultural homogenisation but rather change arising out of various sources.

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1. Introduction

The expanding use of certain formulaic expressions, such as “Hi, how are you today?” and “Have a nice day” or the use of customers' first names in some service contexts in Britain have been explored in the relevant literature and have frequently been attributed to the influence of American culture. Such innovations are disliked by many service employees and customers alike and are even perceived by some as signs of impoliteness (see, e.g., [Cameron, 2007:134](#)). For instance, [Cameron \(2007:134\)](#) contends that “[t]his kind of service-talk is no longer something the British remark on with outraged astonishment, as they often did when it was new; yet I suspect it still grates on many British ears. We do not care for false friendliness, and we still find some. . . [such] techniques rude – intrusive, pushy, over-familiar”. Interestingly, for both the emergence and expansion of such new practices in service contexts and the assumed increase in impoliteness, the blame is laid on globalisation through the simple explanation that traditional British politeness norms are being displaced by essentially American ones. Since U.S. norms are based on showing intimacy rather than respectful distance, they strike many conservative Britons as impolite ([Cameron, 2007:135](#)).

This trend has also been noted and evaluated in various blogs. For some bloggers, it is perceived simply as a social convention, part of business etiquette, which they either accept as such or dislike because it is perceived as automatic and mostly insincere. Some suggested appropriate responses along the lines of “I'm fine, thank you, and you?”, whereas others put forward more literal or more creative responses such as “Do you really want to know or are you just being

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polite?” What transpires from such views is that this kind of innovative verbal conduct is seen as polite but insincere, and a conflict arises because it is viewed as inappropriate in the context of strangers who do not really care about each other.

In this paper, I would like to consider if and to what extent globalisation affects the expression of politeness and impoliteness in the present-day sociocultural reality of major economic, political, social and cultural change. I will draw my evidence from the service sector, primarily in Greece and in England. More specifically, I will consider issues of formality and informality and, in particular, terms of address. Such evidence may offer indications as to the kinds of changes that increased interconnectedness may produce. It is argued that increased interconnectedness does not necessarily mean cultural homogenisation but rather change arising out of the confluence of local and global social forces; thus, local norms and continuity should not be ignored. This paper starts with a brief outline of what globalisation is and how it can have such diverse effects.

2. Globalisation, culture and politeness

Globalisation tends to be perceived as one of the most powerful forces shaping today's world. In its simplest form, globalisation is supposed to refer to the acceleration of processes of interconnectedness in every aspect of social life, most evidently in pervasive cultural symbols such as Coca-Cola and Madonna (Held et al., 2003:327; Turner, 2010), and in discursive practices, which are the focus of this paper. In this context, language is viewed as a commodity and, like other commodities, is seen as falling under the sweeping power of American culture and norms (Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003:535; Heller, 2003). In fact, for some, globalisation is a cover term for Americanisation (see, e.g., Turner, 2010:6). Even though there is much theoretical and empirical discussion on globalisation, there is very little agreement as to what exactly it is. The term seems to be not only fashionable but it is also highly contested and variably used (see, e.g., Held et al., 2003:1; Bauman, 2000: 1; Block, 2004:14–15; Fairclough, 2006:1–7; Turner, 2010:9–10). For Garrett (2010:417) “‘globalization’ is often viewed as a “catchword” . . . whose meaning is vague and elusive, and which is consequently open to variable interpretations”. As Strange (1996:xiii, xii) vividly remarks, globalisation is a term that “can refer to anything from the Internet to a hamburger”. It is one of those “vague and woolly words, freely bandied about in the literature, but whose precise meaning is seldom if ever clearly defined”. There is no doubt then that this ambiguity of the term highlights the complexity of the phenomenon itself.

Among the various threats attributed to globalisation, two are pertinent here: the homogenisation of the world under the influence of the omnipresent American culture, and the insidious spread of English at the expense of lesser-used languages (see, e.g., Trudgill, 2002:147). However, on the positive side there is the increase in intercultural encounters, with the concomitant assumption of the facilitation of intercultural contacts (see, e.g., Block, 2004). As Turner (2010:6) observes, globalisation studies have been characterised by either extreme pessimism or naive optimism but cautions us against such simple dichotomies and further adds that we should not fail to see the complexities of the process and the interaction between local cultures and global processes, resulting in a new dynamic between the local and the global (see also Blommaert, 2003).

In other words, as Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999:81) contend, globalisation should be seen as a dialectic of the global and the local. Androutsopoulos (2010:204) insightfully observes that “[g]lobalization is not a unidirectional process by which linguistic or cultural elements are diffused and uncritically adopted”. In Coupland's (2010:5) words, globalisation is better seen as “a complex of processes through which difference as well as uniformity is generated, but in relation to each other”. The last two definitions also raise the issue of globalisation being a process rather than an end state (Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003:537). This complex interrelationship of the global and the local is frequently rendered by the notion of ‘glocalisation’. “Glocalization both highlights how local cultures may critically adapt or resist ‘global’ phenomena, and reveals the way in which the very creation of localities is a standard component of globalization” (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007:134). In essence, globalisation is a motivating force for profound political, social, economic and cultural change. However, any observed changes within this process should not be associated solely with global convergence since “globalization represents something other than straightforward Americanization or Westernization” (Dewey, 2007:335; see also Turner, 2010:6). Even the use of the English language itself seems to be becoming less dominant on the internet and practically everywhere else (Snoddy, 2003:25; Block, 2004:23).

Consequently, as has been noted by many researchers (see, e.g., Fairclough, 1996:5), it is a mistake to perceive globalisation as the unification of the world because inequalities are widening rather than shrinking. Rather paradoxically, increased concern with globalisation has brought the local to the forefront, as is evidenced, for instance, in the resurgence of local nationalisms (see, e.g., Meyerhoff and Niedzielski, 2003:537). “The collapse of space, time and borders may be creating a global village, but not everyone can be a citizen” (United Nations Development Report, quoted in Dunne, 1999:22). This is a significant observation because access to globalised products is not available to whole communities but only to certain elite minorities. As Blommaert (2003:609) suggests, a realistic look at globalisation processes indicates that not everybody is part of such processes but only particular mediating actors. He (2003:613) further adds that sociolinguistic globalisation does not occur “everywhere, but in particular different yet interconnected places and not in

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