

Conceptualizing politeness in Greek: Evidence from Twitter corpora

Maria Sifianou^{*}



*National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, School of Philosophy, Faculty of English Studies, Panepistimioupoli Zographou,
157 84 Athens, Greece*

Abstract

One of the tenets of the discursive (or postmodern) turn in politeness research is the importance of distinguishing between lay understandings of politeness and politeness as a theoretical construct. In this context, it has been argued that research should focus on lay people's understandings of politeness and impoliteness as they emerge in their everyday interactions. This emphasis has been implemented primarily with examples from the sequential development of real-life interactions and from assessments made by participants. However, in this way, more general conventions may be missed.

Discursive researchers have also emphasized the merits of authentic data and various kinds of tailor-made and classic reference corpora have been used thus offering a broader basis to test theoretical issues. This paper attempts to contribute to this direction and investigate how politeness is conceptualized in Greek using a corpus consisting of short messages (19,500 tweets).

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1. Introduction

Some current theories of politeness emphasize the importance of distinguishing between lay understandings of politeness and politeness as a theoretical construct (Watts et al., 1992; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). In this context, it has been argued that research should focus on lay people's understandings of im/politeness as they emerge in everyday interactions (e.g., Watts, 2003; Mills, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005:16). This emphasis has been implemented primarily with examples from the sequential development of real-life interactions and from assessments made by participants. However, in this way, more general conventions may be missed because even though they are typically situation-specific, there may be pan-situational values and assumptions (Spencer-Oatey, 2005:340).

The main aim of this paper is to try to unravel some such more general values and assumptions and thus contribute to a deeper understanding of how politeness is conceptualized in Greek, drawing evidence from corpora. The paper begins with a brief overview of relevant theoretical issues and proceeds with a brief description and analysis of the data drawn from a corpus consisting of short messages (19,550 tweets) posted to Twitter. As this is initial research, I offer the findings as a testing ground for further scrutiny.

^{*} Tel.: +30 210 727 7809; fax: +30 210 727 7864.
E-mail address: msifian@enl.uoa.gr.

2. Theoretical background

Eelen (2001:32) identifies two possible aspects of “politeness as an everyday concept: an action-related and a conceptual side”, the former referring to actual manifestations of politeness in interactions and the latter to accounts by lay people of what the term ‘politeness’ means. Most relevant research has concentrated on the former, that is, on how politeness arises and is evaluated in ongoing interactions, whereas the latter, that is, lay evaluations of politeness from a more detached perspective has not received equal attention.

In recent politeness research, the relative merits of authentic data have been foregrounded by politeness researchers (Haugh, 2010:141) and many have turned their attention to electronic corpora since they provide a rich source of authentic data which can offer a wider scope and richer insights into linguistic analyses.¹ Broadly speaking, in relation to politeness research, some researchers have constructed their own genre-specific corpora (e.g., Culpeper, 2011; Diani, 2015) while others have either used available ones to explore im/politeness devices/features in discourse (e.g., Beeching, 2006; García and José, 2006; Aijmer, 2015) or a combination of the two (e.g., McEnery et al., 2002). Other researchers have been more concerned with the conceptual side of im/politeness as an everyday concept, through the exploration of metalinguistic expressions and metapragmatic comments in corpora² (e.g., Culpeper, 2009; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2010). Culpeper is one of the pioneers in work that recognizes the emerging importance of corpora in pragmatics and im/politeness research (e.g., Culpeper, 2008–2011), arguing that “[m]etalinguage/metadiscourse can reveal people’s understandings of impoliteness” (Culpeper, 2011:111).

The web as a corpus is becoming increasingly popular in computer-mediated communication (CMC) or more broadly technology-mediated communication (TMC) since it offers a rich source of naturally occurring, digital data (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2006; Locher, 2010). Such sources can be used to explore aspects of politeness both in interaction and its conceptualization, and although the former has received considerable attention, the latter seems to be lagging behind. What I am interested in is conceptualizations of politeness as attested in a Greek dataset compiled from public Twitter messages. In other words, I am concerned with what lay people (twitterers in this case) believe politeness is.

Earlier research on the conceptualization of politeness in Greek, based on questionnaires, has shown that politeness is defined in very broad terms (in comparison to English, Sifianou, 1992:88), and that “politeness to a greater extent but also impoliteness at a societal level are seen as expressed through deeds rather than words” (Sifianou and Tzanne, 2010:681). This accords with Hirschon’s (2001:31) observation that “non-verbal actions play a very important part in maintaining politeness in the Greek context”. More recent data, also drawn from questionnaires (Fukushima and Sifianou, in preparation), again reveals the prevalence of the non-verbal aspect of politeness. My specific concern here then is to investigate whether such understandings also surface in the current corpus, or whether the picture emerging from it is different.

3. Twitter

Given the expansion and availability of the internet, microblogging has become an increasingly popular means of interaction among its users. One such free microblogging service is Twitter, which offers an easy platform for registered users to post brief messages (maximum 140 characters, called “tweets”) and to “follow” and/or “be followed by” other microbloggers (e.g., Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; boyd et al., 2010). Through these brief messages, twitterers interact in almost real time by posting messages on both private and public issues and by sharing opinions. It is thus “a valuable source of people’s opinions” (Pak and Paroubek, 2010:1320). Given the brevity of these messages, the investment in both thought and time is less than that involved in regular blogging. The posted tweets can be made either public or distributed within a social network, but the dominant trend is for them to be open to the public (Marwick and boyd, 2010; Hargittai and Litt, 2011:3; Page, 2012:183).

Motivated by the informal and spontaneous nature of communication through social media channels and its potential value as a source for studying lay people’s understandings of politeness, we have been gathering public text data drawn from Twitter’s huge repository, via its new advanced search engine.

4. Corpus data for Greek

Mikros and Perifanos (2013) have compiled the first Greek Twitter Corpus but it was unavailable to us due to the restrictions of redistribution imposed by the Twitter terms of use. Thus, we had to develop our own corpus of tweets written in Greek. To do so, we have gathered public text data pulled from Twitter’s vast repository. Searching for instances of the

¹ Even though corpus linguistics and the pragmatic study of politeness took off at about the same time, it is only relatively recently that they have begun to work together (Leech, 2014:256).

² See Culpeper (2011:74) for the distinction between the two.

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