

# Politeness, Language and Culture

## Study of the Relativity of Politeness

Bei Gao<sup>1</sup> Wei Zhou<sup>2,\*</sup> Wen Liu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>East University of Heilongjiang, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China

<sup>2</sup>Harbin Engineering University, Harbin, Heilongjiang, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: 1356318973@qq.com

### ABSTRACT

Politeness is a universal phenomenon in human society. Yet people's views on politeness vary from culture to culture. And the influential works concerning politeness written by Brown & Levinson and by Leech are criticized for having a "Western bias". It is argued that there is no universal theory of politeness applicable to all cultures. This paper makes an analysis of the relationship between politeness, language and culture, and based on the analysis, it probes into the relativity of politeness.

**Keywords:** *politeness, culture, language, relativity of politeness*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Language serves as an indispensable means by which people communicate with each other and achieve certain goals. Language helps bind people together into a speech community in which people "share a set of norms, rules, and expectations regarding the use of language." (Yule, 2000:239) Politeness, usually achieved through the use of language, may be either one of the goals which people tend to achieve with certain linguistic choices, or one of the criteria which people are supposed to abide by while using language to communicate with others. Politeness is a universal phenomenon in human society, and it has become a hot issue discussed by many scholars. Penelope Brown, Stephen Levinson and Geoffrey Leech are among the pioneers in the academic study of politeness. Their theories of politeness have been most frequently cited and discussed by other researchers. Besides, they also received many criticisms in numerous grounds. One of the main focuses is on the universals and relativity of politeness. It has been criticized that Brown and Levinson's treatment of politeness as well as that of Geoff Leech has a "western bias", and therefore should not be regarded as "a universal theory applicable to all languages and cultures" (Leech, 2005:4). Many researchers prefer to emphasize the cultural factors and study the differences of

politeness in different cultures and the relativity of politeness (Foley, W. A. 2001; Tian Jinping, & Zhai Jianhong, 2005). Indeed, as speaking or communicating takes place in certain social and cultural environment, culture may exert great influence on people's use of language and their views on politeness. However, as is known to all, politeness is a universal phenomenon in human society. Then how to get a clear view of the universals and relativity of politeness?

This paper attempts to analyze the relationship of politeness, language and culture. And based on the analysis, this paper probes into the relativity of politeness.

### II. THE RELATIONSHIP OF POLITENESS, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

In daily communication, people make different linguistic choices for different purposes among which politeness turns out to be an important one. According to Yule, politeness, in an interaction, can be defined as "the means employed to show awareness of another person's face." (LoCastro, 2003: 112) Brown and Levinson hold that "politeness involves us showing an awareness of other people's FACE WANTS, and FACE refers to our public self-image." (Tian Jin-ping & Zhai Jianhong, 2005: 31) They specify five strategies for achieving politeness, "ranging from 'bald on-record' performance of the FTA (face-threatening act) to its non-performance." (Leech, 2005:4) And Leech also delivered his six maxims of politeness in 1983. Both Leech's and Brown & Levinson's treatments of politeness have been criticized for having a

\*Project: The paper is supported by the Research Project of East University of Heilongjiang. Grant Number: HDFKY200211. The Research Project of Heilongjiang Provincial Federation of Social Sciences. Grant Number: WY2019075-C. The Research Project of Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities. Grant Number: 3072020CF1206.

Western bias and therefore cannot "claim to present a universal theory applicable to all languages and cultures." (Leech, 2005:4) Many researchers argue that politeness is influenced by many cultural and social factors, so "the true nature of politeness is the relativity, which determines the appropriateness of politeness in different occasions." (Wang Jianhua, 1998:18) These give rise to some questions. Is there an East-West divide in politeness? What's the relationship between politeness and culture? As politeness is mainly achieved through the use of language, it may be helpful to make an analysis of the relationship between language and culture first.

#### *A. Language and culture*

Language is the principal and indispensable means whereby people communicate with each other and conduct their social lives. "When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways." (Kramsch, 2004:3) According to Claire Kramsch (2004: 3), language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. People communicate with each other and carry on their social lives mainly with the help of language. They assigned particular meanings to some words or expressions which gradually became conventionalized. In the course of time, people in the same speech community gradually formed a set of norms, rules and expectations regarding the use of language. To some extent, language is a carrier or reflection of the culture. According to Bourdieu, a social theorist, a language "is itself a set of practices that imply not only a particular system of words and grammatical rules, but also an often forgotten or hidden struggle over the symbolic power of a particular way of communicating, with particular systems of classification, address and reference forms, specialized lexicons and metaphors." (Duranti, 2002:45) Indeed, culture, which is learned, transmitted and passed down from one generation to the next through linguistic communication, imposes cultural conventions and norms on language users. (Kramsch, 2004) Therefore, people in different speech communities may have different ways of expressing politeness, which are sanctioned by different cultural conventions.

#### *B. Politeness and culture*

Despite the nonverbal behavior concerning politeness, politeness is mainly achieved through the use of language. As is discussed above, culture may impose some norms or constraints on people's use of language. It can be observed that people from different cultural backgrounds usually adopt different ways of expressing politeness. Then what's the relationship between politeness and culture? How can we understand the relativity of

politeness? Getting an overview of the studies of politeness, many researchers approach to politeness in different ways. Among numerous works concerning politeness, Brown & Levinson's as well as Leech's treatments of politeness turn out to be the most influential ones. Brown and Levinson's formulation of politeness and face was objected by some researchers such as Matsumoto and Gu who dealt with East Asian cultures and emphasized cultural differences in politeness. (Foley, 2001:274) Matsumoto and Gu argue that Brown and Levinson's division of face into positive and negative face is untenable for East Asian cultures, and that their treatment of politeness and face "derives from the importance given to individualism in the Western European concept of the person." (Foley, 2001:274) They hold that Brown and Levinson's "individual-wants concept of face" is based on the individualism and therefore "does not fit the traditional Eastern ethos of identifying with the group, in which each person has a place defined by obligations and rights in relation to superiors, equals and inferiors." (Leech, 2005:7) It is true that people from different cultures follow different norms, rules and expectations which are formed, conventionalized and passed down in their own cultures. For instance, the Chinese people put more emphasis on the merits of modesty than the western people. What is regarded by Chinese people as friendliness, such as asking some personal questions, may be offensive to western people who may regard it as intruding their privacy. The cultural differences may help explain why people suffer from culture shock while going abroad.

In a word, politeness is closely related to culture. People from different cultures seem to follow different criteria of expressing politeness. Additionally, people do not live in a vacuum but in a speech community which is full of cultural conventions. In Claire Kramsch's words, "etiquette, expressions of politeness, social dos and don'ts shape people's behavior through child rearing, behavioral upbringing, schooling," and professional training. (Kramsch, 2004:6) Therefore, when people are faced with the need to show politeness, they are likely to be influenced by their cultural expectations and norms.

#### *C. Politeness and language*

Language is the principal means by which people communicate with each other and carry out the social activities. Politeness is one of the reasons why people adjust their speech or writing and make certain linguistic choices. People from different cultures appear to use different expressions of politeness. This may be attributed to both the language differences and differences in their cultural conventions and expectation of what is

considered as polite or impolite. As is discussed above, culture imposes some constraints, norms and expectations on language users. The forms encoding politeness have been conventionalized in the course of time. Language is one of the means people express politeness. Politeness, in turn may reflect the constraints and norms which the culture imposes on people's use of language.

### **III. THE RELATIVITY OF POLITENESS**

From the above analysis, we can see that politeness, culture and the use of language are closely related to one another. People's use of language reflects their culture and meanwhile is constrained by the norms and expectations of the culture. Politeness appears to be a universal phenomenon in human society. It can be either one of the goals which people want to achieve with certain linguistic choices, or one of the criteria which impose constraints on people's use of language in a certain speech community. Yet the views on politeness seem to vary from culture to culture, which gives rise to doubts on the universals of politeness and leads to the study of the relativity of politeness.

#### *A. Politeness: culture-loaded convention*

From many studies of politeness, it is easy to find that people's expressions of politeness are influenced by many cultural factors. Due to the variations in the ways people from different cultures tend to express politeness, many researchers objected and criticized Brown & Levinson's and Leech's treatments of politeness for having a Western bias, and they hold the view that politeness is influenced by many social and cultural factors and that there seems to be no universals of politeness.

Among numerous studies of politeness, most writers do not explicitly define "politeness". Politeness proves to be a difficult concept to discuss. Many researchers deal with politeness in different approaches. Fraser provides an overview of the four main approaches to politeness, i.e. social-norm view, conversational-maxim view, face-saving view and the conversational-contract view. (LoCastro, 2003:275) Among the four approaches, the face-saving view, derived from Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, is most discussed and even challenged. The main focus is directed to the cultural differences.

Indeed, politeness cannot be separated from the cultural factors. Politeness exists only in the civilized human society where people need to communicate with each other, keep certain interpersonal relationships, and conduct their social lives. Being put in different cultural settings, politeness can only be understood by taking into

account the various social and cultural factors. Different cultures form different views of values and norms which demand people to act accordingly. "The use of politeness in communication is dependent on the language and social or cultural milieu," and "the forms encoding politeness have often become highly conventionalized." (Leech, 2005:24) In a sense, politeness is a convention agreed on by the whole speech community and reflects the culture of that speech community.

#### *B. The relativity of politeness: culture-specific strategies*

Born in certain cultural background, people are inevitably influenced by and gradually become accustomed to the conventions, norms and expectations of that culture. It's natural that people's views of politeness are influenced by many social and cultural factors. And there seems to be no principles of politeness applicable to all languages and cultures. However, no one can deny the fact that politeness is a universal phenomenon in human society. Thus there must be some common basis for politeness to be regarded as a universal phenomenon. It is assumed that "the basic functions of language are very similar in different societies, though with different linguistic conventions, in all parts of the world, because all people have similar needs, similar relationships, and in general, share the same world." (Palmer, 1986:3) Then how to understand the relativity of politeness?

Being challenged by many researchers for having a Western bias in his principles of politeness, Leech reviewed the previous studies of politeness and restated his principle of politeness in his paper, 'Politeness: Is There an East-West Divide', in 2005. According to Leech, there are two ways of looking at politeness: absolute politeness scale and relative politeness scale. The absolute politeness scale allows us to "order utterances on a scale of politeness out of context." (Leech, 2005:8) In explaining the relative politeness scale, Leech says that "this is politeness relative to norms in a given society, for a given group, or for a given situation." (Leech, 2005:9) The relative politeness scale is sensitive to context and "registers 'over-politeness' and 'under-politeness', as well as 'politeness appropriate to the situation'." (Leech, 2005:9) Besides, as Brown and Levinson's treatment of politeness and face has been greatly criticized for having a Western bias, Leech provides a new definition of face: "Face is the positive self-image or self-esteem that a person maintains as a reflection of that person's estimation by others." (Leech, 2005:27) According to Leech (2005:27), people follow certain principles of politeness in order to either avoid loss of face or enhance face. Politeness, though related to many cultural factors,

may be one strategy people adopt to show their concerns for each other's face needs.

In different cultures, people conduct their social lives in different cultural contexts in which certain norms, rules and expectations are imposed on them. Therefore, when people express politeness, they are supposed to follow the cultural conventions and adopt certain strategies for expressing politeness. In China or Japan, for instance, modesty has a higher rating than in western societies. So, in order to act politely, people are supposed to reject the compliments rather than accept them by replying "Thank you". And this, according to Leech, has something to do with the "quantitative (i.e. in degree or position on a scale) differences in the scale influencing the norm of politeness." (Leech, 2005:25) Apart from that, "qualitative differences (i.e. in the actual social content of the scales themselves)" may influence people's ways of expressing politeness. (Leech, 2005:25) These differences include the social distance, in-group and out-group differences, socially-defined rights and obligations, etc.

Taking cultural factors into consideration, it's easy for us to understand why people from different cultures act so differently in showing politeness. However, while pondering over politeness more deeply, we can discover that the underlying reasons for politeness are people's concerns for face-needs. The relativity of politeness does not mean that politeness in different cultures differs from each other in nature. Instead, the relativity lies in the degrees on a politeness scale and that people adopt different strategies for expressing politeness according to the different cultural contexts and constraints on language use.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Politeness has been a hot issue since Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness was published. For many years, many researchers have studied politeness in different approaches and argued over the relativity and universals of politeness. Are there universals of politeness? Is there an East-West divide in politeness? In the previous parts, this paper makes an analysis of the relationship of politeness, language and culture, and based on the analysis, this paper tries to study the relativity of politeness. Politeness, one of the goals people want to achieve by making different linguistic choices, is closely related to culture. It is a convention agreed on by the speech community, and people are supposed to follow certain norms and expectations while expressing politeness. Politeness is relative in the sense that it is sanctioned by cultural conventions of a given society, for a given group, or for a given situation, and that people adopt different strategies for expressing politeness

according to their cultural conventions. People's polite behavior is influenced by various cultural factors. But are there universals of politeness? Is there an East-West divide in politeness? Leech avoids talking of universals of politeness, but he does believe that there is a common pragmatic and behavioral basis for polite linguistic behavior in different societies, "so that (for example) when Chinese speakers talk of *limao* (礼貌) and English speakers talk of politeness, they are not talking about totally unrelated phenomena." (Leech, 2005:28) And he also argues that "despite differences, there's no East-West divide in politeness." (Leech, 2005:29) Maybe it's still difficult to talk of universals of politeness, but it may be helpful to have some idea of what the relativity of politeness refers to.

#### **References**

- [1] Duranti, A. *Linguistic Anthropology*, Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002. Print.
- [2] Foley, W. A. *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001. Print.
- [3] Kramsch, C. *Language And Culture*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language and Education Press, 2004. Print.
- [4] Leech, G. N. *Principles Of Pragmatics*. New York: Longman, 1983. Print.
- [5] Leech, G. N. *Politeness: Is There An East-West Divide?* [J]. *Journal of Foreign Language* 2005(6):3-31.
- [6] LoCastro, V. *An Introduction To Pragmatics: Social Action For Language Teachers*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2003. Print.
- [7] Palmer, F. R. *Mood And Modality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. Print.
- [8] Tian Jin-ping, & Zhai Jian-hong. *On The Influence Of Culture On Politeness* [J], *Journal Of Xingtai Vocational and Technical College* 2005(2):31-33.
- [9] Yule, G. *The Study Of Language [M]*, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [10] Wang Jianhua. *Relativity of Politeness* [J]. *Journal of Foreign Language* 1998(3):18-22.