

GEOFFREY N. LEECH, *THE PRAGMATICS OF POLITENESS*

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In his very last monograph which came out just a few days before his death, Geoffrey Leech returns after more than thirty years to a topic close to his heart, his pioneering but oft-criticized conception of politeness in order to defend it. Actually he addressed politeness in three previous papers, of which two (2005, 2007) appear as the core Chapter 4 of the monograph in a restated form.

Leech's cleanly structured book is divided into three main parts. The first is laying the foundations, the second presents case studies of politeness and impoliteness in the use of English, and the third ties up the loose ends and outlines further perspectives. In Preface (pp. ix-x), Leech notes that he has "oriented this book more toward pragmalinguistics, an area that has been somewhat neglected of late, while not ignoring sociopragmatics". By pragmalinguistics he means the interface between pragmatics and linguistic form, i.e., the way a language (both polite and impolite forms) is used for politeness. Secondly, he acknowledges that the focus "will be mainly on one language: English". Finally he explains the book intends to describe politeness phenomena (in English) and provide a model or theory of politeness "as a characteristic of human behaviour", not guidance to politeness.

In Chapter 1, Leech makes a careful distinction between his conception of politeness as "communicative altruism" and "true" altruism, and outlines eight features or aspects of politeness: it is non-obligatory, it is gradable, there is a sense of normal as to when and how to be polite, it is situation-dependent, it involves a reciprocal asymmetry, it can manifest itself in repetitive behaviour, it involves the passing of some kind of transaction of value, but tends to preserve a balance of value. It also presents a list of six important distinctions to be made: the first between bivalent and trivalent politeness. The former refers to honorification (honorific usage) and involves two factors determining degree of politeness, social or horizontal distance (D) and power (vertical distance; P). The latter, called transactional politeness by Leech, includes one more factor, weightiness of the transaction (called Rank of imposition by Brown and Levinson [B&L]), and is more central to politeness in English. The second distinction is that between pos-politeness and neg-politeness (see below). The more important neg-politeness reduces the negative cause of potential offence (e.g. polite requests relying on indirectness, hedging, and understatement). Pos-politeness grants the addressee some positive value (in the form of offers, invitations, compliments, etc.). The other distinctions discussed in detail are: pragmalinguistics vs. sociopragmatics; pragmalinguistic (or absolute, context-indifferent) politeness vs. sociopragmatic (or relative, context-sensitive) politeness; addressee politeness vs. third-person politeness (with four subtypes); and finally a social explanation of politeness (comity) vs. a psychological one (or face, which Leech defines as "the positive self-image or self-esteem that a person enjoys as a reflection of that person's estimation by others" and follows by a detailed comparison with B&L's conception of face-threat).

Chapter 2 outlines some of the views on the characteristics of politeness and presents some phenomena which Leech believes should be explained (indirectness, reciprocal asymmetry, gradations of politeness, opposite interpretations of elliptical



expressions, and preference and dispreference) as well as an overview of prominent theories (models) of politeness (those of B&L and Leech (1983), the approaches by Yueguo Gu, Sachiko Ide, Blum-Kulka et al., Fraser and Nolen, Arndt and Janney, the frame approach of Aijmer, Terkourafi and others, the Spencer-Oatey rapport management, and Richard J. Watts' approach). It serves as the basis for a comparison with his new model and leads him to answer both the basic question What is politeness? (in keeping with his manner adverbial understanding of it and according to the General Strategy of Politeness — see below) and whether politeness lies in the mind of the speaker or the hearer. Actually, he believes that the politeness meaning conveyed by an utterance is co-constructed by Speaker and Hearer alike. Like any pragmatic meaning in general, politeness is initially a matter for S and secondarily a matter for H. Next he touches on kinds of evidence for politeness and which discipline it belongs to (pragmatics). Chapter 3 addresses “a basis for politeness modelling”, and deploys a pragmatic theory of illocutionary force and (in)directness combining (Neo-)Gricean thinking (with reference to Levinson) and the Searlian speech-act model, focusing on negative politeness, which is generally acknowledged to be typical of Anglophone societies.

The first part culminates in Chapter 4, Politeness: the model, which forms the core of the book, for which the previous chapters pave the way and the subsequent ones serve as illustration. It starts with the description of criticisms levelled at B&L (1987 [1978]) and Leech's original model (1983). The reason why he includes the critique of B&L is that both theirs and his approach have been lumped together as an essentially Gricean treatment of politeness, and criticized in a similar way. Specifically, B&L have been criticized for the “universal” claim of their politeness theory. It was described as having a Western, if not Anglophone, bias undermining its universal applicability to all languages and cultures. Leech objects that politeness is clearly a phenomenon common to speakers of all languages and so the ideas of politeness, at least to some extent, must extend to different languages, and by the same token Eastern and Western politeness should be comprehended by the same model. He points out that critics such as Wierzbicka, who stresses the culture-specific nature of interpersonal interaction, unfairly overlook B&L's acknowledgement that “interactional systematics are based largely on universal principles. But the application of the principles differs systematically across cultures, and within cultures across subcultures, categories and groups.” Other aspects of B&L's model criticized for a Western bias are their definition of politeness in terms of negative and positive face (reflecting the individualist and egalitarian focus on the supremacy of the individual's desires and right to freedom); their definition of negative and positive face (departing from Goffman's “face,” and ultimately from Chinese conceptions of face); their West-oriented explanation of the whole of politeness as a mitigation of face-threatening acts by means of five superstrategies (on record, bald or with redress, etc.); and their formula for calculating the strength / weightiness of an FTA in terms of the three cumulative factors D (distance), P (power), and R (rank of imposition) ($Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$) as being too simple and the factors vaguely defined.

As might be expected, Leech's 1983 model was similarly charged with universalism (absolute politeness) and like B&L's with being Gricean and biased toward Western

values. Following the four maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, it was seen by some as dated (the four maxims have been criticized for being unclear, overlapping, or of differing statuses) and the term *maxim* itself is sometimes criticized as suggestive of prescriptivism. Leech's politeness Maxims of Tact, Generosity, Modesty, Approbation, Agreement, and Sympathy were considered too numerous and his approach as "expansionist" in contrast with the reductionist approach of Relevance Theory. Leech's answer to this is that all these maxims actually represent variants of the same overarching constraint, which he describes as "the General Strategy of Politeness." Another objection was that the CP and the PP (Politeness Principle) are of rather different natures; politeness is socially controlled, while the Gricean principles are "unmarked", "asocial," and allowing no deviation from rational efficiency without a reason. Leech replies that both are regulative principles, which can be violated, observed to varying degrees of strength, and used to generate implicatures. The constituent maxims of the PP, like those of the CP, can clash with one another and also with those of the CP. Another presumed "flaw" of the PP in common with the CP (that it should be hard to be impolite just as it is hard to be uncooperative: tokens of apparent uncooperativeness get to be interpreted as cooperative at a 'deeper level') is dismissed by Leech: being uncooperative and impolite is not difficult. Finally the criticism that his model (like B&L's,) "has a bias towards 'concern for others'," whereas "self-presentation" is another interactional concern is countered by Leech's claim that his account of politeness reflects positively on self-presentation, which is seen as S's face maintenance and enhancement, rather than maintenance and enhancement of O's face (O = other person(s), mainly the addressee).

Having dealt with these issues, Leech unfolds his new model starting by the re-statement of the Politeness Principle which he describes as "*a constraint observed in human communicative behavior, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain or enhance communicative concord or comity*". It could be easily reworded in keeping with Grice's formulation: Make your conversational contribution such as to avoid communicative discord and foster communicative concord. By "discord" he means a situation in which the participants entertain incompatible goals, while "concord" is one in which both participants explicitly or implicitly purport to pursue each other's goals.

The important proviso is that both discord and concord are scalar phenomena, in terms of their degree and significance; politeness itself is scalar. The scalarity is expressed by two kinds of politeness scale: (i) pragmalinguistic (formerly "absolute") politeness scale which registers degrees of politeness in terms of the lexico-grammatical form and semantic interpretation of the utterance and is unidirectional; (ii) sociopragmatic (formerly "relative") politeness scale assessing politeness relative to norms in a given society, group, or situation. Unlike the absolute or semantic scale, it is sensitive to context and is bidirectional. A form considered more polite on the pragmalinguistic politeness scale can be judged less polite relative to the norms for the situation. The sociopragmatic politeness scale registers "overpoliteness" (a potential sarcasm) and "underpoliteness," as well as "politeness appropriate to the situation."

When communicating, people pursue two kinds of goal. One is called the illocutionary goals, i.e., what people want to do through linguistic communication (e.g. to



ask permission, give advice, etc.). The other involves social goals, i.e., people want to maintain good communicative relations with other people. Illocutionary and social goals may either support or compete with each other, and here the goal of being (to some degree) polite is particularly important. When the illocutionary goal supports the social goal, Leech speaks of pos-politeness (for instance paying a compliment has the positive purpose of placing a high value on the other person's qualities, and so per se helps to maintain good communicative relations). When the illocutionary goal competes with a social goal, we get neg-politeness (a request has a negative purpose which is offset by the social goal intended to avoid offence by mitigating the degree to which S's goals are imposed on H).

Leech retains his original division of speech events by their illocutionary function into four categories vis-à-vis the social goals (in fact reflecting the relation between the CP and PP): *competitive* (the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal, e.g., ordering, asking, demanding, begging) — subject to neg-politeness; *convivial* (the illocution coincides with the social goal, e.g., offering, inviting, greeting, thanking, congratulating) — subject to pos-politeness; *collaborative* (the illocutionary goal is indifferent to the social goal, e.g., asserting, reporting, announcing, instructing) — with no particular reason to involve politeness since the participants' illocutionary goals neither compete nor contribute to the social one; *conflictive* (e.g., threatening, accusing, cursing, reprimanding) — with no reason at all to be polite as the aim of the speech event is to cause deliberate offence. Neg-politeness and pos-politeness are not to be confused with B&L's positive and negative politeness addressing H's positive and negative face respectively.

Leech's model continues to be maxim-centred, only he specifies the concept of maxim more carefully and comprehensively: a maxim is a **constraint** influencing speakers' communicative behavior; the constraint is aimed at achieving a particular goal; the goal can be achieved to a greater or lesser degree, being associated with a scale of value that extends from a neutral or negative pole to a positive pole; maxims can conflict or compete with one another in context. In addition to defining his PP as "a constraint observed in human communicative behavior" he distinguishes a "superconstraint" which he calls the **General Strategy of Politeness (GSP)**. It says that in order to be polite, *S* (*S* = self, speaker) expresses or implies meanings that associate a favourable (high) value with what pertains to *O* (other than self) or associates an unfavourable (low) value with what pertains to *S*. The use of the GSP ensures that offence is avoided: both participants are "leaning over backwards" to avoid the potential discord resulting from following their own goals, or conversely "leaning forward," to appease *O* by pos-politeness. The GSP is not only a superconstraint, it is a supermaxim comprised of five pairs of component maxims, which are more specific realizations of the GSP. The question is whether Leech actually needs to separate the GSP formally from the PP.

The **five pairs of component maxims** (constraints) relate to five areas: (i) wants, (ii) qualities, (iii) obligations, (iv) opinions, and (v) feelings. Thus the first pair, the Generosity/Tact Maxims, give a high value to *O*'s wants and a low value to *S*'s wants respectively. Accordingly, the Generosity Maxim (commisives: offers, invitations, and promises) is *O*-oriented expressing pos-politeness, while the Tact Maxim (di-

rectives: impositions such as requests) is *S*-oriented expressing neg-politeness. The same kind of asymmetry (*O/S* orientation, high/low value, pos/neg-politeness) is displayed by the remaining four pairs: the Approbation/Modesty Maxims (compliments / self-devaluation), the *S*-to-*O* Obligation/*O*-to-*S* Obligation Maxims (apologies, thanks / responses to these), the Opinion Maxims, i.e. the Agreement/Opinion Reticence Maxims (agreeing / not giving opinion), and the Feeling Maxims, i.e. the Sympathy/Feeling Reticence Maxims (congratulating, commiserating / withholding feelings). Leech hastens to point out that the application of the PP is far from simple and straightforward and mentions several caveats: people are impolite as well as polite; pos-politeness and B&L's positive politeness have different scopes; conversation irony and banter ("the second-order strategies") have specific roles; maxims compete and clash (such as Generosity competing with Agreement when people argue over who should pay the bill in a restaurant); there are factors that determine the appropriate degree of (sociopragmatic) politeness; and complexities that arise from the asymmetry between *S* and *H*.

Before Leech arrives at a tentative conclusion on universals of politeness at the end of Chapter 4, he discusses interlinguistic and cross-cultural variation in politeness which depends on language (pragmalinguistic aspects) and social/cultural milieu (sociopragmatic aspects). The linguistic encoding of politeness displays various morphological, syntactic and lexical differences across languages. The sociopragmatic factors determining the strength of the communicated values form scales (likely to be fairly general) but the values (norms) will vary from culture to culture. The variation is both *quantitative* (in terms of degree or position on a scale), e.g. Modesty appears to have a higher rating in Japanese or Korean than in Anglophone societies, and *qualitative* (differences in the actual social content of the scales themselves), e.g. social distance is interpreted differently, there are different norms for in-group and out-group politeness (praising one's family members), there are differences in the evaluation of cost-benefit (it may be easier, relatively speaking, to borrow umbrellas in Japan, cigarettes in Russia, and cars in the US). Leech also returns to the issues of bivalent politeness (honorific usage) and face. He says that honorific usage differs from trivalent or transactional politeness (based on the *D* scale, *P* scale and *R* scale, the latter extended by Leech to the cost-benefit scale) by being obligatory even in transactionally neutral situations, though not specifically goal-oriented; it is, however, more dependent on convention and social constraints. He answers the question of whether these two "politenesses" are close enough to be covered by the same theory and name in the affirmative. He explains the root of the difficulties with B&L's concept of face and offers his own interpretation in terms of the GSP serving mutually dependent face needs of both participants. On the whole his belief that the descriptive apparatus of his approach can deal with politeness in different cultures once the cross-cultural scalar variation is properly taken into account seems reasonably justified.

Part II is essentially the application of his model to a range of politeness phenomena in English with examples collected from the BNC and the Longman Corpus of Spoken American English. The speech events described and analysed are apologies (viewed as prototypes rather than rule-governed categories, both from pragmalinguistic





guistic and sociopragmatic perspectives, including responses and public apologies; Chapter 5), requests (Chapter 6) and all kinds of other types of speech events involving politeness, such as offers, compliments, advice, agreement, congratulations, and commiserations (Chapter 7). Chapter 8, on the other hand, is complementary to the previous ones in that it describes phenomena which are the opposite of politeness, i.e. impoliteness or rudeness. It also deals with irony or sarcasm (understood as mock politeness) and with banter (mock impoliteness) whose interpretation, however, depends on politeness principles.

Part III brings the book to a conclusion with an outline of three research topics and their relation to the unfolded model. The first examines how politeness can be researched (i.e. data collection, methods of analysis, multiple-choice, interview, discourse completion, role play, etc., Chapter 9). The second deals with a highly topical subject of interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics subsuming politeness and includes a survey of EFL learner studies on politeness, data collection methods, and the applicability of the PP and the GSP (Chapter 10). The last Chapter 11 is a short overview of politeness in English from a historical point of view, starting with a gloss on historical pragmatics, and then tracing politeness in Old, Middle and Modern English. The chapter concludes with an interesting foray into the “Is politeness on the decline?” debate in which he argues against Robin Lakoff’s *camaraderie* thesis as a sign of declining standards, saying that although bivalent politeness has long been on the decline in English, trivalent (or transactional) politeness is largely unaffected by this trend. Appendix at the end of the book offers a sketch of the precursors of modern politeness studies and a new look at Searlo-Gricean pragmatics.

It has become almost a matter of course in publications on politeness to mention Leech’s politeness framework in passing with a brief dismissive note. In some cases (as Leech observes) the authors of such notes attribute to his model features it never had. The Introduction to Lakoff and Ide (2005), for instance, contains an endnote saying that “Leech (1983) treats politeness not as one reason for CI, but as a subcase of the Maxim of Manner.” In light of this tendency Leech’s decision to respond to these criticisms (by clarification or correction where they have merit) makes perfect sense. In fact, the way he has revamped his 1983 model results in a flexible and cogent tool which I think is capable of handling politeness phenomena in English and other languages quite convincingly and is a viable alternative (not only) to B&L’s approach, as his case studies of principal speech events demonstrate. Also, at least to my belief, he succeeds in bridging the East-West politeness divide, and making sense of the commonalities and the differences. In addition, he offers a thoughtful and insightful overview of the essential work on politeness done so far, including the currently active areas of interlanguage and diachronic research. Anyone interested in politeness could do worse than start with Leech’s monograph. A knowledgeable analysis of Leech’s contribution to pragmatics is provided by Culpeper (in print). Leech has indeed left behind a valuable legacy in pragmatics and it is to be hoped that sooner or later (more) empirical studies will appear that will put his model to practice and continue to refine and validate it.

ABBREVIATIONS:

B&L Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]); CI Conversational Implicature; CP Cooperative Principle;
 D social distance (= horizontal distance) between *S* and *O*; FTA fact-threatening act; GSP General Strategy of Politeness; *H* hearer

(or reader), i.e., addressee(s); *O* other person or people, i.e., other than the speaker/writer; *P* power (= vertical distance) of *S* over *O* or of *O* over *S*; PP Politeness Principle; *R* rank of imposition; *S* speaker (or writer); *W* weight of an FTA.

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