Cultural Variability within Politeness Theory

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Abstracto: Debido a su omnipresencia en la comunicación humana, la cortesía es considerada como un tema de interés para muchos investigadores perteneciendo éstos a una amplia variedad de disciplinas. Su naturaleza ya situada ha implicado en la investigación sobre cortesía, la cultura, considerándola a menudo como una dimensión analítica definitoria. El presente artículo situará nuestra investigación en el contexto de los debates actuales sobre la investigación de la cortesía en todas las culturas y presenta brevemente las maneras en las que está representada la cultura en los estudios contemporáneos de cortesía. El propósito del autor no es resolver los problemas de la cortesía lingüística, sino más bien poner de relieve algunas cuestiones que existen y que deben ser abordadas desde una perspectiva intercultural. Por lo tanto, este artículo se centrará en la relatividad cultural de la cortesía.

Palabras clave: cortesía, cultura, comunicación intercultural y transcultural.

1. Language and Culture

The major problem with cross-cultural or intercultural approaches is, as Eelen (2001) and Watts (2005) point out, the lack of a solid and workable definition of the word „culture". Nevertheless, we are able to recognize cultural differences between

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groups and to pinpoint what constitutes those differences without needing to give a full definition of the term. Arndt and Janney (1987a, p. 21) warn us against cultural over generalization by highlighting that intercultural communication is a complicated matter as it involves much more than simply translating politeness formulas from one language into another.

To be effective in intercultural communication, both a native speaker as well as a nonnative speaker of that language need certain general and culture specific knowledge and skills. Thus, in intercultural communication, these skills are viewed as an essential dimensions which are important for functioning in a foreign culture. We believe that we need to have general communication knowledge and skills, but it is also of utmost important to possess specific knowledge and skills in the language/culture of communication, that is to acquire communicative competence. We perceive intercultural communication competence as having two components: a general one that consists of interpersonal and intercultural knowledge and skills; a specific one that includes language and culture specific knowledge and skills.

Learning the structure of a second language entails learning how to use language in a new cultural context. In this respect, Canale & Swain (1984, p.189) developed a model of communicative competence and distinguished the following three levels: linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of how to use language appropriately) and strategic competence (knowledge of how to deal with trouble and breakdown). We note that the first two types of competence are culture specific, whereas strategic competence could be related to what Hammer (1989) calls intercultural problem-solving skills. In reviewing the intercultural communication literature, we found that Hammer's communication skills, which appear to be central in interpersonal communication in general (expressiveness, immediacy, interaction management, etc), may be effective in intercultural context as well. In addition, other skills, such as problem-solving skills and task-orientedness, appear to be specifically related to success in intercultural communication. However,

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the concept of competence has not been clearly defined yet and more empirical research is needed to be able to assess it, but we believe that an integration of both social science and linguistic concepts is needed for that.

Furthermore, the process of globalization has highlighted the interaction between linguistic and cultural factors in the construction of discourse, both within specialized domains as well as in wider contexts. Thus, Gotti (2004, p. 2) states that "linguistic research has shown both the existence of overt and covert strategies that modulate the author's control of the recipient's response, and the presence of discoursal realizations aiming at presenting facts and concepts from a non-neutral perspective. This is a confirmation of the fact that language is generally marked both in its cultural content and in the range of available linguistic variants."[1] We hold a strong opinion that domain-specific languages are exposed to the pressures of intercultural variation, as not only the socio-cultural factors inherent in a text, but also interpretive culture-dependent sets of knowledge deeply affect its realization and interpretation within the host professional community. For instance, Charles's work on negotiations has established how the relationship between a buyer and a seller in a negotiation influences the discourse strategies that are used. Also, Nickerson's work on email in an Anglo-Dutch multinational corporation traces both organizational and cultural influences on the realization of the discourse.

2. Politeness Theory and Culture

Politeness is an area of interactional pragmatics that has experienced a huge interest over the last decades and its universal principles are reflected in language use. Researchers have examined worldwide languages and language varieties both individually and cross-culturally. Politeness can be regarded as a social value in human interaction and is an essential component in a

[1] Gotti, M. (2010), "Specialised Discourse in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts", http://asp.revues.org/839; DOI: 10.4000/asp.839.

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great variety of personal and professional communication situations.

Since the seminal publications of R. Lakoff (1977), politeness has emerged as an area of linguistic interest to many scholars in fields such as pragmatics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, philosophy and discourse analysis. In Lakoff's research, politeness serves to avoid conflict and is described as a phenomenon by means of which cultures can be categorized or which can be categorized according to cultures. In his view, there are three rules for conflict avoidance ('distance', 'deference', 'camaraderie') and cultures can be categorized depending on which of the rules are more prominent. For example, British culture gives prominence to 'distance', while Japanese culture prefers 'deference'.

Following Lakoff, research into linguistic politeness has progressed since the pioneering formulation of politeness theory accorded to P. Brown and S. Levinson („Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage", 1978) and the flood of empirical research that it inspired. They also defined politeness in terms of conflict avoidance based on the Cooperative principle, but they elaborated different concepts by means of which politeness can be described across cultures.

Their model views language in terms of the extent to which speakers strategically deviate from Gricean maxims in order to save their own face and/or that of others. One of Brown and Levinson's (1987, p. 253) stated hopes is that their model of the universals in linguistic politeness can be used to characterize the cross-cultural differences in ethos, the general tone of social interaction in different societies. One implication of this is that some cultures may be characterized as negative politeness cultures, while others as positive politeness cultures (1987, p. 245).

While hugely influential, Brown and Levinson's theory on politeness has attracted wide criticism for their culture-specific data. Immediately after the reprint in 1987, opposition was raised against Brown and Levinson's conceptualization of politeness as the realization of face threat mitigation. Consequently, a great number of articles and books have been published on both polite-

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ness (see R. Watts, 2005) and impoliteness (see J. Culpeper, 2011) during the past decades. In his book „Impoliteness. Using Language to Cause Offense", J. Culpeper aims at considering whether there is cultural variation in the ways in which people get under each other's skin, using the impoliteness events reported by students in five geographically separated cultures. With regard to face, Quality Face (QF) turned out to be overwhelmingly the most important type of face relating to impoliteness. He makes several important observations regarding both any and primary offence, pointing out that all the cultures feature QF (the aspect of face most in tune with Goffman's original definition) as the most important. Finding QF to be an important category for the English data is not a surprise to us since this concept has been central in Anglo-Saxon politeness research. Regarding cross-cultural variation, he offers explanations for the importance of QF, Social Identity Face and Taboo for the English data.

Some researchers claimed that Brown and Levinson's approach did not account for ways in which related lexemes in other languages were used to refer to equivalent aspects of social behavior. Spencey-Oatey (2002) finds that their approach is susceptible to ethnocentricism and argues for a framework based on universal sociopragmatic interactional principles. Thus, researchers can explore the importance that people attach to these principles in different languages and cultures. Moreover, the distinction between emic and etic perspectives (Pike, 1990 in Eelen, 2001, pp. 76-78), especially the difference between the cultural insider's and outsider's viewpoints, can shed light on the difficulties found in designing reliable cross-cultural research.

Other alternative approaches to linguistic politeness have emerged on the market, notably G. Leech's conversational maxim' views of politeness that derive from Gricean pragmatics (1983). In addition to the work of Lakoff, Leech and Brown and Levinson, contributions to politeness theory have been made by Blum-Kulka (1992), Fraser and Nolen (1981), Arndt and Janney (1985), Ide (1989) and Watts (1989). In particular, Gino Eelen has stirred much debate and opened a new chapter in politeness

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studies with the issue of his book „A critique of Politeness Theories" (2001). Until the publication of his book, researchers treated 'culture' as a normative concept, talking about proper rules of politeness in different cultures. He argued that politeness researchers should abandon the notion of 'culture' because it is too vague. As Eelen notes: „in the practice of reasoning and exemplifying, the notion of 'culture' tends to become rather blurred. A notion that can simultaneously denote any group of people based on any characteristic loses its operational value" (Eelen, 2001, p. 173). Eelen's argument has proved to be influential since the current frameworks of linguistic politeness tend to treat culture more critically.

Recent comparative studies have tended to take English as a pole of comparison in cross-cultural research between two languages and cultures in order to characterize the ethos of those language communities and researchers from cultures outside the Anglo-American tradition have questioned the bases of the theories mentioned above. For instance, Ide (1989) argued, based on data from his culture, that Brown and Levinson' framework cannot account for many culture-specific manifestations of linguistic politeness. He disagreed with the central notion of 'face' as defined by Brown and Levinson and advanced notions like 'volition' and 'discernment'. Eelen contrasts Ide with Watts in that the latter „associates politeness with volition only, while discernment is linked with politic behaviour" (Eelen, 2001, p. 19). Furthermore, the 1990s saw pioneering projects outside the English-speaking world, such as Held (1995), published in German, and the widely influential work of Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992) in French.

3. Conclusions

This article has briefly reviewed one essential component of linguistic competence, politeness and examined culture as a dynamic and complex set of values which should be used in politeness research. The aim was to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which politeness affects and has bearing on the linguistic and rhetoric forms within different cultures. From all these works,

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it has become clear that people do not speak to one another just to convey information or even merely to do things, but also to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships within a particular sociocultural context. We will conclude by stating that politeness will always be a slippery, ultimately indefinable quality of interaction which is subject to change through time and across cultural space.

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