POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ROMANIAN LINGUISTIC AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS

Ştefan GĂITĂNARU*

Abstract: *The present paper approaches the grammatical markers of politeness (the degrees of politeness with personal pronouns), which are very well represented in Romanian and the semantic markers (types of speaker's communicative behavior involved by the politeness maxims). However, it proposes a configuration of the degrees of politeness which is different from that in the normative studies; it also replaces the concept of face, generalized in the pragmatics studies, with the entities by which it is particularized, with respect to the forms of subjectivity manifestations in language: image, status, reputation.*

Keywords: *marker, interpersonal, behaviour.*

1. The main question regarding the deictic substitutes which the politeness is expressed through is, in a grammatical perspective, whether they should be described as a subclass of pronouns included in the non-determinative personal pronouns category (together with the proper personal pronouns and the reflexive pronouns) or they are degrees of politeness of personal pronoun, considered as a basic form in the system/process of deference gradation.

GALR, I, 2008 distinguishes only two classes of pronouns: personal and non-personal, disregarding the determination criterion. Thus, considering the former class, there is no difference between the non-determinative (proper, politeness and reflexive) personal pronouns and the determinative (emphatic and possessive) pronouns. This delimitation was necessary, because the two subclasses are differently placed according to the way they operate the correlation between the category of person (specific to the pronoun), on the one hand, and the categories of gender and number, common in the nominal group, on the other hand. The oppositions of person make them similar. They are different because: the non-determinative pronouns have suppletive forms and they can never be determiners of a noun by means of agreement (they can not become pronominal adjectives); the determinative pronouns consist in suppletive forms and normal, synthetic inflexion forms and they can be determiners by means of agreement, becoming pronominal adjectives. Moreover, the emphatic pronouns are considered to function almost only as pronominal adjective, while, in recent grammar works, the possessive pronoun is dissociated from the semi-independent pronoun *al, a, ai, ale* and is also considered to function only as pronominal adjective. This is a feature that brings them together as determinative pronouns and it separates them from the non-determinative pronouns to a greater extent.

The deference is a semantic category by means of which the speaker marks the discursive distance between the emitter and the hearer (the 2nd person) and the reference person (the 3rd person).

As it has been pointed out, GALR, 2008, according to the traditional grammars, proposes the politeness pronoun to be considered as a subclass separated from the proper pronouns, but it does not include the sub-classifying criterion in the description and it refers directly to the gradation phenomenon: "the semantic structure

* University of Piteşti; stefan_gaitanaru@yahoo.com

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

of the politeness pronouns is: [proper personal pronoun] + [deference/discursive distance]" (GALR, I, 2008: 212).

Even a process of becoming grammatical elements is spoken about: "discursive and social relations between the participants in the verbal interaction are grammatically encoded in forms of politeness pronouns" (*ibidem*).

This process is a form of a grammatical category expression which involves at least an opposition, constantly polarized by elements of form. It means that the proper personal pronoun, as a neuter term, can not be separated from the developed opposition with the forms/degrees of politeness like the adjective in the positive which is neuter regarding the intensity can not de detached from the degrees of comparison system.

Although it does not imply this, the normative grammar inevitably comes to record it, observing: "The Romanian politeness system has three degrees of politeness: zero politeness (expressed by the forms of proper personal pronoun) – minimal politeness – maximum politeness" (*ibidem*: 215).

The diagram where GALR relates the degrees of politeness should be reconsidered, as it does not contain all the oppositions and it omits some indispensible forms.

In fact, there are not three degrees of politeness. Still, the analogy with the adjective functions, because there are four degrees of intensity with the adjective: positive, intensive, proper absolute superlative (*foarte înalt*) and excessive superlative (*prea înalt, peste măsură de înalt*). It should be examined: "The degree of exceeded (excessive) intensity is chiefly marked by the prefixes and prefix-like elements *arhi, extra, prea (…)* and by the quantitative adverbials such as *peste măsură (de), peste orice limită (de), peste poate (de*)..." (Iordan, Robu, 1978: 408).

If the excessive with the superlative has not been individualized by the grammarians because of its reduced frequency, with the degrees of politeness the situation is different.

So, the diagram will be like this:

Zero degree	The usual degree for unknown or older persons	The hierarchical degree of superiority	The degree of reverence – great distance in hierarchy
tu	*dumneata*	*dumneavoastră*	*Domnia Voastră*
voi	*dumneavoastră*	*dumneavoastră*	*Domniile voastre*
el, ea	*dumnealui, dumneaei*	*dânsul, dânsa*	*Domnia Sa*
ei,ele	*dumnealor*	*dânşii, dânsele*	*Domniile lor*

The existence of the degree of reverence as the fourth degree is registered also by GALR: "In contemporary Romanian there can be noticed a mobility of the system which is open towards the fourth degree of politeness, correlated to a register opposition: formal, emphatic vs. informal, non-emphatic. The opposition is expressed by certain old forms of the politeness pronoun which are attracted in the system of contemporary Romanian: *Domnia Voastră, Domnia Sa (...) dumneavoastră, dumnealui*"(GALR, I, 2008: 216).

This mobility of gradation system is not a feature of contemporary Romanian, but it has been manifest even since Old Romanian, as a structural constant. Thus, the very frequent forms in the historiography texts (*Măria Ta, Măria Sa, Înălţimea Voastră*) or in other functional variants(*Sfinţia Voastră, Preasfinţia Ta, Înalt Presfinţia Voastră, Precucernicia Voastră...*) are quoted.

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

The opposition formal-informal functions when the discursive distance between speaker and hearer is small. Still, the reverence forms are compulsory, disregarding the conventional nature of the discourse, when the discursive distance is great, disadvantaging the speaker.

GALR does not distinguish the degree of usual politeness from the hierarchical one, in the structure of basic oppositions. As the grammar studies point out, the former involves an out-group speaker, whom his age or unfamiliarity recommends as not being part of the group. Politeness is usual, required by the speaker's education level.

This fact (the absence of the opposition and forms in the diagram) seems to be incomprehensible, because in the collateral description, which, indeed, does not present clear delimitations, it is stated: "Romanian has a system of hierarchical politeness. The next extra-linguistic variables determine the selection of politeness pronouns/personal pronouns in discourse: relative age (the younger one is deferent to his elders, especially children/teenagers relative to adults, but not only); social status, position (the one with a lower social position is deferent to the one with a superior social position) […] conventional relations… (*ibidem*).

GALR considers that there are no forms for *voi* (the inclusive plural of *tu*) in the minimal degree of politeness which is not registered as out-group; in fact, the form for addressing to many persons is homonymous to the one in the singular: *dumnevoastră, domnule; dumneavoastră, domnilor*.

The presence of the pronoun *dânsul* in the degrees of politeness diagram is justified this way: "In the 2nd person singular the balance of the system has been created by including the forms of personal *dânsul, dânsa, dânşii, dânsele* pronoun among the politeness pronouns" (*ibidem:* 215).

This shifting is a feature of Muntenia idiom, as Puscariu stated: "semantic differences occur between *el* and *dânsul*: *dânsul* indicates persons superior with respect to social position or to age" (Niculescu, 1999: 145).

Actually, this shifting represented an innovation: "The most significant innovation in contemporary Romanian with respect to the use of the pronoun *dânsul* has been the assignment of a new politeness meaning to this word. Different facts and observations make us record this new use which certain researchers contest unreasonably" (*ibidem*: 166).

As GALR has asserted, *dânsul* had become functional for "those who had to adopt forms of respect to unfamiliar, superior persons with respect to age or social position in their conversational idiom" (GALR, I, 2008: 168).

This specializing of the pronoun *dânsul* has been done in the context of its occurrence as a noun substitute belonging to the personal gender. It was the first differentiation from *el*, which continued to refer both to objects and persons.

As Iorgu Iordan noticed, the second stage was its equivalence with a politeness marker, with the pronoun *dumnealui* (an apparent genitive and dative form), completing it in the nominative and accusative (Niculescu, *op.cit.*: 145). The hierarchical politeness (discursive distance) marks the third degree of politeness which has the form *dumneavoastră* both in the singular and in the plural for the in-group persons: *dumneavoastră, domnule rector, dumneavoastră, domnilor decani. Dumnealui, dumneaei, dumnealor* are used, presenting an almost perfect synonymy, for the 3rd person.

In some grammar studies, the forms of politeness are generically called reverence pronouns. However, reverence is involved only in the fourth degree of

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

politeness, when the discursive distance between hearer and speaker leaves the latter far behind: *Domnia Ta, Domnia Sa, Domniile Voastre, Domniile Lor*...

As it has already been shown, according to the diversity of registers determined by the performing context, phrasal forms such as *Excelenţa voastră (Excelenţă!), Înălţimea voastră, Preacucernicia Voastră, Înalt Prea Sfinţia Voastră, Majestatea Voastră*...can occur.

Social hierarchies within family generated forms such as *matale, tale, tălică, matale*...

2. Pragmatic aspects

This part approaches the way the extra-linguistic context determines the basic structures of the discourse. Actually, it studies the behavior acts which language has to express, not to solve.

2.1. Overall frame

If a certain aspect of the language is taken into account, then the expression *homo loquens* should be considered with a great degree of redundancy, as Benveniste pointed out: "In the world we shall find a human who speaks, a human who talks to another human, and the language teaches us the very definition of human" (Benveniste, 2000, I: 246).

To the strategies of politeness not all the types of discourse matter, but only the argumentative act of conversational type which is based on the speakers' addressing strategies.

In order to achieve the interpersonal communicative agreement, the researchers, beginning with Grice, involved the cooperative principle. Along with it, Leech "pose l'existence d'un Principe de Politesse, placé au même niveau hiérachique que le Principe de Coopération" (Alberdi Urquizu, 2009: 25).

Consequently, a great importance has been assigned to it because it has been considered that, in the discursive act, it engages: „tous les aspects du discours qui sont régis par des règles, et donc la fonction est de préserver le caractère harmonieux de la relation interpersonnelle" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996: 50).

The two principles are functional through their being complementary. The first starts from the cooperative premise that the speakers and hearers should adopt: "The CP enables one participant in a conversation to communicate on the assumption that the other participant is being cooperative" (Leech, 1983: 82).

The other has to create and maintain the conversational agreement: "The PP has a higher regulative role than this: to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being in the first place" (*ibidem*).

2.2. Subjectivity role

On a chessboard, none of the pieces asserts that another piece does more or less than it really does, because everything is established by exact, objective rules. However, the verbal language is characterized by persons' polarization: "Persons' polarization, here is the fundamental condition of language, whose process of

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

communication, which we started from, is a pure pragmatic consequence" (Benveniste, *op.cit.*: 247).

More possibilities of polarization are known.

Thus, each time the sentence meaning can be ranked in the truth values diagram, in the dichotomy true-false.

The referential function involves the proper knowledge of the real fact that it has to transmit. But this knowledge can be partially either exact or inexact or intentionally inexact, which represents an illocutionary aspect.

This relativity of knowledge allowed a function of language which has been little approached by the linguists, the dissimulative one, to manifest. Within illocutionary area, dissimulation represents the major coordinate of subjectivity manifestation in language. And subjectivity, from the literary text to the perjury that is legally condemned, characterizes language to a large extent: "Language is so deeply marked by the expression of subjectivity that we come to wonder whether it could still function with the same name if it were built other way" (Benveniste, *op. cit.*: 247).

2.3. Identity element

The phenomenon of politeness involves speaker's expressing the hearer's identity in the discourse. The hearer should recognize himself in the proposed assertion.

The basic identity element was called *face* (Goffman, 1967: 5) and it was considered to be a constant element in the strategies of politeness configuration by the subsequent pragmatic research.

The unitary, indecomposable character of the notion leads to its insufficiency related to the subjectivity forms of manifestation in language.

Three aspects of the basic identity element can be distinguished, representing different stages of its manifestation: image, status and reputation.

2.3.1. The image, beginning with the individual image of himself, up to the community image of him, allows a larger space for subjectivity manifestation. The extension of its dimensions in one direction or another can not be controlled: the hearer has few arguments to compel the speaker to become objective. It is that area of community which consists of common people, in different domains of life, without significant achievements that could offer them a noticeable social position.

2.3.2. The status implies that, beyond the image, the hearer has recognized professional, social and political achievements. These prove certain qualities and competences that are officially recognized: the hearer is a teacher, engineer, painter, manager, deputy…The speaker is compelled to take them into account, both pragmatically and grammatically.

2.3.3. The hearer has also a reputation, along with image and status. This means the person's situation when he/she gets recognition beyond his/her status due to certain exceptional achievements in his/her activity that led him/her to a national and/or international confirmation. The objective record of this reputation, its generalization, triggered the recognition in the community subjectivity.

2.3.4. At each of the three levels, the phenomenon of positive/negative politeness presents different possibilities of manifestation: confirmation vs. invalidation (at the image level), recognition vs. repudiation (at the status level), edification vs. depreciation (at the reputation level).

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

3. Types of identification in discourse

The basic identity element could be considered to be the *image* (status represents an official image; reputation is a notorious image), in order for the demonstration to be easier.

The identity element is an extra-linguistic fact, while the interpersonal agreement achieved through the politeness strategies implies its being created again in discourse.

Like any communication act, governed by specific codes, the phenomenon of politeness involves three possibilities of realization: observance, exaggeration and deviation.

The first one consists in ensuring the similitude between the extra-linguistic image and its configuration in the discourse assumed by the speaker, either its being positive or negative.

Addressing by exaggerating the image is determined by the illocutionary force, by an assumed intention having a certain goal. It does not exceed the cooperative principle, as it is not constructed as a menace to the image of participants in communication. It presents two types: encomiastic to the hearer and obedient, exerted by the speaker. Sometimes, the roles may change: the hearer may assume obedience and transfer the praise to the other pole of communication. The condition is that the participants in communication should be separated by a great discursive distance.

The third form of manifestation for the phenomenon of politeness as a discourse fact is the deliberate or involuntary deviation from the real dimensions of the image.

Conceiving the behavior acts by which politeness is realized as acts that threaten the image (Face Threatening Acts), Brown and Levinson give deviation a great importance: "Politeness is then the major source of deviation, from such rational efficiency, and is communicated precisely by that deviation" (Brown et Levinson, 1987: 95).

This exceeds the cooperative principles, as the participants leave the agreement area and reach the conflict area. At the speaker's pole, it is realized by praise; at the hearer's pole, by criticism (adversity).

4. Types of markers

Referring to the normal politeness, respecting the code of transferring the extra-linguistic image in discourse, language has generated formal markers (the degrees of politeness with the personal pronoun).

The other types, which also use formal markers, differ through the semantic markers. These are more important in those languages where the formal markers are not well individualized.

Also the politeness maxims that Leech has recorded (tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, sympathy) and the behavior acts, disposed in the opposition positive / negative, which have been evoked by different descriptions of politeness strategies (advantages, costs, criticism, self-criticism, praise, disapproval, agreement, sympathy, antipathy – Leech; order, request, criticism, accusation, offer, promise, apology… - Brown et Levinson) belong to the semantic area.

The diversity of the semantic fields which this type of behavior acts belongs to lead to the possibility of their further diversification.

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)

Bibliography

Alberdi Urquizu, A., *Politesse, impolitesse, auto-politesse: Janus revisité*, în REF Cédille, 2009.
Benveniste, E., *Probleme de lingvistică generală, I*, Bucureşti, Universitas, 2000.
Brown, P., Levinson, S.C., *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.
GALR, I, 2008 – V. Guţu Romalo (Coordonator), *Gramatica limbii române, I. Cuvântul, II. Enunţul*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei.
Goffman, E., *Interaction ritual: essays on face-to-face behaviour*, New York, 1967.
Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L., *Conversaţia. Structuri şi strategii. Sugestii pentru o pragmatică a românei vorbite*, Bucureşti, Editura All, 1999.
Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C., *Les interactiones verbales, II*, 1992.
Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C., *La conversation*, Paris, Seuil, 1996.
Leech, G., *Principles of Pragmatics*, Londra, Logman, 1983.
Niculescu, Al., *Structura exprimării pronominale a politeţii în limbile romanice*, în vol. *Individualitatea limbii române între limbile romanice. 1. Contribuţii gramaticale*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică, 1965.
Al. Niculescu, Al., *Pronumele* dânsul *în limba română*, în vol. *Individualitatea limbii române între limbile romanice. 3. Noi contribuţii*, Cluj Napoca, Editura Clusium, 1999.
Şerbănescu, A., *Aspecte ale politeţii în cultura română*, în vol. *Limba română, limbă romanică*, Bucureşti, Editura Academiei, 2007.

BDD-A14486 © 2014 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 17:59:17 UTC)