Romanian Politeness before 1989: the Influence of Communist Ethics

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Abstract:
The theoretical research in the domain of politeness, begun with Brown and Levinson (1978) and continued by numerous researchers, inspired a huge amount of cultural analysis on different communities. Many linguists have focused on politeness, as it seems to be a domain giving birth to numerous intercultural misunderstandings. So far, the research has shown that face threatening and face flattering acts are culturally variable and specific, depending on social distance between speaker and hearer, authority of hearer on speaker, potential threat of a specific act in the culture where it occurs. In the domain of politeness, the influence of the Romanian communist regime on the people who were formed during the respective period included an array of impositions (from compulsory terms of address to forbidden words and ideas), language being put in the service of a limited ideology instead of serving truth, personal relation and communication, and freedom.

Key words: politeness, social context, ideology, positive face, negative face, face threatening act, face flattering act

Introduction

Our theoretical approach relies on the distinctions operated by the research in politeness between the individual need for respect (negative politeness) and for appreciation (positive politeness). Another useful concept in our research has been optionality (the possibility to choose to do or not to do a face-flattering act or a face-threatening act. Any social context influences politeness codes. As norm, politeness is "*supported by social sanctions; negative sanctions punish the breach, positive sanctions reward exemplary conformity.*"(Goffman, 1973:101). Any change of social ideology leads to a revision of the norms that sanction the informational and relational content of individual speech acts.

Ideological tendencies with consequences on politeness

Looking through the numerous books on ethical issues written during the communist period in Romania, we have grouped the main topics they referred to that had an important bearing on politeness under the following five headings:

- aversion against religion (and especially against Christianity);
- criticism against all other political system except communism and socialism (the most criticized were the ancient feudal system, the monarchy, and the capitalism) ;
- the need to work, to be informed and to continually inform one's superiors for the prosperity of socialism in Romania;
- the moral ideal was the "new man", namely the communist activist;
- culture had become the "socialist culture".

The information on the politics of the communist party, the only party in Romania beginning with the year of 1948, was present in all the media. We are going to quote some relevant fragments from the ideological documents of the period before 1989 and we will comment on the influence of the communist ideological system on the politeness of those times.

1.Aversion against religion

In the collective work *Etică şi echitate socialistă* (Socialist Ethics and Equity), religion is seen as the enemy of people's "*revolutionary impetus*". Consequently, all religion was supposed to disappear from socialist Romania:

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"*As the classics of Marxism have shown, religious misery is the expression of real misery, religion attenuates social sensitivity, it confuses protest and comes with the narcotic of imaginary compensations, and stifles the people's revolutionary impetus. Consequently, the disappearing of religion, of this illusory happiness, is the condition of the people's real happiness.*" (1972: 389)

A pocket book on the same theme – *Etică creştină şi etică marxistă* (Christian Ethics and Marxist Ethics) compares the two types of ethics. The author's point of view is that Christianity refers to an ideal of happiness in the otherworld, to which Marxism opposes its ideal of daily existence. "*Institutionalized*" Christianity is considered to be a "*means of domination used by the leading classes*", a repressive ethos, because of the values it proposes according to the author's vision (humility, poverty, moderation, abstinence, beatitude). On the contrary, "*Marxist humanism*" is considered to be a "*complete*" and "*practical*" humanism, which proposes the following ideal – "*creative activity*" and a "*human man*" that can only be acquired through the "*humanization of reality – the disappearance of private property*" (1975: 59). Man is seen as "*the supreme being for man*" (1975: 54) and economic activity appears as "*a way to satisfy all needs under normal conditions, satisfaction that should not depend on any other thing but these needs*" (1975: 56).

All this religious repression had important consequences on politeness, as one can see from the media of those times:

- all the expressions (greetings et wishes) in which the name of God appeared explicitly were systematically banned; the traditional Easter and Christmas wishes and greetings (*Paşte fericit ! – Marry Easter!, - Hristos a înviat ! Christ has resurrected! - Adevărat a înviat ! Indeed, he has resurrected!*
- the Christmas feasts were given the name of "sărbători de iarnă" ("winter feasts") and Santa Clause became "Moş Gerilă" ("Father Frost") the typical Christmas and New Year wishes being *Sărbători fericite! / Happy feasts!* instead of the traditional *Craciun fericit!* / *Marry Christmas*!

These effects of the communist ideology are surprising as they appear in a Christian country where each village has its church or churches and their role in the daily spiritual life of the population is significant. There was much tension between the then politics and the daily customs of the people (because the church was however tolerated for the services it provided: baptism, marriage, funerals, etc. and people's spiritual life was, despite the party directives, crucially influenced by the church).

2.Criticism against all other political system except communism and socialism

When the politically active media was not exalting the regime, it was because their second main concern was to criticize all other political system. To have an ideological preference other than the politically correct one (communist and socialist) was considered a menacing act against the regime. These constraints are restrictive acts for individual freedom, namely threatening acts for his positive face (an individual was not appreciated for what he was) and his negative face (the respect for individual territory, thoughts and convictions was inexistent, except for the case when one's personal needs coincided with the conditions provided by the system).

All bourgeois, royal or capitalist preference was banned. The former appellatives *domnişoară /* mademoiselle, *doamnă* / madam, *domnule* / sir, considered bourgeois and obsolete were systematically replaced by the ideologically imbued terms of address *tovarăşa, tovarăşe*/ comrade.

3.The need to work, to be informed and to continually inform one's superiors for the prosperity of socialism in Romania

Work was considered as the source of all good and "*the way of development of human personality*". In the booklet *Etica muncii şi modul de viaţă* (Work Ethics and the Way of Living), the author sings the praises of work ethics:

"*In people's daily work, where the existence of ethical norms is under the control of the public opinion, of political organizations, of juridical and factors, the positive features develop*

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faster. Outside the place of work, though there are obvious positive tendencies, there are principle violations, there is a larger sphere of propagation of certain obsolete habits in point of the relations between man and wife, the position concerning the woman and concerning the education of children." (1969: 207-208).

This privileged position of work (part of it patriotical, namely not paid) in the party's politics lead to the appearance, in a magazine of the 50s, of a chase against the greeting *Noroc !/Good luck !*. Apparently this word was not in harmony with the politics that praised work as a means of having control over one's fate, and of not leaving anything under the influence of "chance".

In the same sense, we should note the typical wishes of the time (especially coming from the then leaders): *Un an cu rezultate mai bune în toate domeniile!* (A year with better results in all domains!) and *Un an bun şi multe realizări!* (A good year and many accomplishments!).

Of course work is necessary, the problem in this case is not work itself, but the accent on the obligation to work, leaving no room to optionality and breaching individual autonomy. To this obligation was added that of taking part to ideological instruction classes and of denouncing anyone who was, openly or privately, thinking that there was something wrong about this regime. Many people have endured long years of prisons and many have died for having had the boldness to **think** and to be free.

4.The moral ideal: "the New Man"

What was the human ideal of those times? A *modest, honorable* man, preoccupied with "*improving his ideological and political level*", namely the communist activist. We quote from *Etică şi echitate socialistă* (Socialist Ethics and Equity): "*the best of our contemporaries*" are "*those who represent the moral standard of the* **New Man**." (1972: 345).

Moreover, "*The communist is a model and an incarnation of the moral, political and civic features. His devotion for the communist ideals and principles, his action of chasing exploitation and for the triumph of the socialist and communist regime express his attachment to the relations and the values of the new social regime*" (1972: 77).

In the society where this "new man" lives like a sort of robot with no right to having personal opinions, born for the propagation of socialist and communist ideas, politeness changes its definition completely. The diffusion of the then ideology becomes mores important than the respect for the positive and the negative face of the individuals. In this sense, politeness becomes "*a positive moral norm, which involves the duty to respect man, and at the same time the right to* ***warn him without any reserve for his deficiencies****, but objectively, not passionately, respecting the truth.*" (1972: 359) (our underlining).

Consequently, face threatening acts as public criticism and self-criticism were instituted as politeness norms, this type of criticism becoming a face flattering act for the positive face of "communism" and "socialism", personified by the then leaders.

5.The "socialist culture"

Though underlining the need for culture in a broad sense, in the communist works the accent falls on the indispensable ideological education. Cultivated from birth, this ideology was turning into myth all the communist actions and ideals:

"*Moral education, the formation of one's citizen conscience, of one's feelings and behavioral habits means above all to teach the children to love their* ***socialist*** *country. Under all circumstances, under forms that are adequate for their comprehension, parents can educate their children in the spirit of devotion for the country and the* ***party****, of pride for the glorious past of our country, for the* ***working class****, of appreciation for the richness and beauty of our country, of love for the native tongue and the country's culture.*" (*Principiile morale ale socialismului în relaţiile de familie* / The Moral Principles of Socialism in Family Relations, 1973: 46-47) (our underlining).

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In the domain of politeness, in the Socialist Republic of Romania, this excessive cultivation of the communist ideology resulted into a cult of personality whose beneficiaries where the then party leaders, turned into a sort of god-like figures.

Conclusions

In our opinion, the aspects highlighted so far show that the Romanian communist and socialist system, based on an ideology that stifled individuality and forced the individuals into the mold of the "new man", brought with it new norms of politeness. Instated in the name of the collective welfare, they served not each individual that was part of the Romanian nation but the interests of a minority. The search for real values and truth, has placed post-1989 Romania face to face with two main distinct ideologies: it has discovered today's mentality of globalization, with its capitalist roots, and it has rediscovered its profound Christian beliefs. Both of these ideologies are at work in today's politeness, triggering continuous reflections on **who we are**, *in relation to ourselves, to the others and to the world, with all its visible and invisible aspects*.

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