Three levels in politeness theory and practice

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Traditional theories of politeness (Lakoff 1973, Brown & Levinson 1978/1987, Leech 1983) pinpointed politeness phenomena as a worthwhile area of research within linguistic pragmatics starting from a clearly Gricean and speech-act theoretic perspective. Within this perspective, it has seemed justified to give priority to the speaker’s intention, and abstract away from actual speakers to Model Persons endowed with (individual) rationality and face. One tacit assumption of these theories is that different cultures are (at least internally) homogeneous and agree on what politeness is (hence, on assessments thereof). This further allowed them to extrapolate from observational data to universalising rules/principles, which were subsequently applied in numerous empirical studies. These studies did not always confirm the claims of the theories; yet, proposed revisions remained firmly within the original ‘intention/rule-based’ paradigm.

Later approaches informed by social theory (Eelen 2001, Mills 2003, Watts 2003) stress the contested nature of politeness norms across cultures, and, crucially, within cultures. Given this heterogeneity of judgements about politeness, the role of the addressee becomes of paramount importance: politeness cannot in principle be a matter of using particular linguistic devices/strategies because it is negotiated at the micro-level and jointly by the speaker and the addressee. Thus, only the study of situated exchanges - where active ratification of the politeness potential of any particular utterance can be observed - is warranted, and neither prediction nor generalisation should be aimed at. Taking these recommendations to heart when applied in the analysis of particular examples can nevertheless leave one with the feeling that individual exchanges are being minutely described, but the totality of these descriptions do not add up to an explanatory theory that carries over to politeness phenomena in general, setting them apart as an object of study distinct from other facets of social life. Granting that generalisation and prediction are defining features of scientific theorising (Forster 2000), their a priori rejection by these later approaches seriously compromises their aim to provide a viable theoretical alternative for future empirical studies.

This paper takes the view that what is needed is a three-way distinction analogous to that drawn in the social sciences among structures, habitus, and practices (Bourdieu 1990), a distinction which interposes between the ‘formal’ meaning potential of an expression as part of a system and in virtue of its relation to other forms in that system (the macro-level of traditional theories), and the ‘actual’ meaning of that expression on an occasion of use (the micro-level of later approaches), a level of socio-historically constrained preferred interpretations. At this level, politeness phenomena are attributed to conventional beliefs about the linguistic behaviour that is appropriate in different situations. Such behaviour (in Arundale’s 1999 words, “face-constituting” behaviour) is jointly determined by varied considerations, both short-term (the goal at hand) and longer-term (e.g. network and identity issues). Thus, while rationally-motivated at the macro-level (i.e. against the backdrop of the alternatives available in the culture as a whole), it cannot be so motivated at an individual level, both due to practical limitations (processing in real time), and in principle (being ‘anchored’ within the culture,
speakers do not have a bird’s-eye view over it). Conventional beliefs about politeness provide speakers with a ready-made solution to this complex problem.

An opportune tool for theorising about conventional beliefs pertaining to politeness is frames, which, by summarising stereotypical information about situations (the sex, age and social class of the interlocutors, the relationship between them, and the setting of the exchange) and the appropriate use of language therein, capture the evaluative link between the two. Frames constrain the interpretation process by providing a ‘minimal context’ against which generalised (yet defeasible) implicatures of politeness arise. Thus, a link is made with the original questions of what politeness is pragmatically, which is left untouched in newer approaches.

This proposal is empirically motivated by the analysis of a large corpus of spontaneous conversational Cypriot Greek data. The method of collection and analysis of these data also answers two central concerns of later approaches. First, the role of the addressee is now acknowledged during both data collection (through participant observation), and analysis. Taking into account the addressee’s uptake in categorising particular utterances as realising particular types of acts, and, subsequently, as appropriate realisations of those acts, circumvents the danger of offline re-interpretation during post facto interviews (Mills 2003). Second, quantitative analysis of these data revealed concrete tendencies of co-occurrence for particular sets of situational features and particular expressions. Such ‘bottom-up’ discovery of politeness norms over a large corpus (interpreted emically, as outlined above) answers concerns arising from the contested nature of norms at the micro-level (Eelen 2001, Watts 2003): it is only against the background of such norms that actual speakers can position themselves in social space, by aligning their behaviour with that of particular groups, as they perceive them through socialisation within a particular community. The proposed approach thus answers these later concerns, while re-claiming linguistic politeness as a viable object of scientific - in particular pragmatic - theorising.

References