THE ART OF POLITE COMMUNICATION

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Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, (1978,1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, CUP. ISBN: 978-0-521-31355-1 Paperback.

To be an effective communicator, it is imperative to be polite and the linguistic behaviour of the interlocutors becomes prime concern. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson's theory on polite discourse recognizes politeness as a sociolinguistic universal and offers a literature to explore politeness phenomena across languages.

Sharing an apparent similarity with Gricean maxims (Maxim of Quality, Maxims of Quantity, Maxim of Relevance, Maxim of Manner) Brown and Levinson's treatment of politeness makes a significant theoretical departure by introducing the concept of 'face'. "The whole thrust of this paper is that one powerful and pervasive motive for not taking Maxim-wise is the desire to give some attention to face........ Politeness is then a major source of deviation from such rational efficiency, and is communicated precisely by that deviation." (p.95) The core issue of the 'politeness phenomenon' revolves around the positive and negative representations of 'face'. The dual aspects of 'face' reflect human mind and connect him to his social milieu. The self–image of the interlocutors and its social acceptance constitute positive face whereas the freedom from imposition is the salient feature of the negative face. It is the general human desire to be accepted and appreciated. On the contrary, everyone dislikes being dictated, forced or ordered by others. Despite man's attempt to protect his 'face', it can be threatened by some linguistic behaviour labelled as *face- threatening act* or FTA. Communication devoid of FTA is a remote reality. Interlocutors can hardly converse without ever disagreeing, complaining, making a request or asking questions. Consciously or unconsciously, a speaker shakes the self-image of a hearer or intrudes upon his personal domain posing a serious threat to his negative 'face'. However, *face-threatening act* is an unavoidable component of natural conversation, regardless of its damaging effect. Brown and Levinson propose some politeness strategies that will mitigate the effect of FTA.

The payoffs of the politeness strategies determine the relevance of their application. Brown and Levinson's model contrasts *bald-on-record* strategy with its *off-record* counterpart. The former strategy runs a greater risk of threatening the hearer's 'face' but enjoys greater clarity in message transfer. A blunt, direct utterance is likely to derive maximum dividend from the request, order or command, used in a conversation. The *off-record* strategy, though largely reduces the FTA effect, does not ensure complete decoding of the message by the hearer. It may even create an ambiguous situation. In an utterance as follows 'Damn, I'm out of cash, I forgot to go to the bank today.' (p.69), the hearer may not get the hint of being requested to lend money to the speaker. The urgent requirement of monetary help demands the choice of *bald-on record* strategy. In fact, the preference for the application of a particular strategy is likely to be communicative situation dependent.

The politeness phenomenon model proposes some significant negative politeness strategies e.g. *Hedges* i.e. the use of phrases or verbs of a language, which softens the FTA effect. *Hesitation*, *mumbling* that otherwise block fluency, may be used for negative politeness. A speaker may deliberately sound pessimistic and use the expression of doubt (e.g. in English, 'I don't suppose you could lend me your book for a day' or 'There's no chance you could accompany my brother tomorrow'). Imposition on the hearer can be minimized by suitably constructing utterances e.g. in English, one may use the modal auxiliary 'could' in a sentence such as 'Could I borrow one tea-spoon of sugar?' The speaker may apologise to the hearer by using certain linguistic constructs (e.g. in English, 'I'm sorry', 'Please, forgive me') mitigating FTA impact. Each situation exhibits negative politeness. In certain language, the overt use of address terms, e.g. 'sir' or 'madam' in English, is likely to indicate the social hierarchical difference between interlocutors. Thus, assigning higher status to the hearer, the speaker will reduce the threat to the hearer's negative face.

A speaker may complement a listener, may minimise disagreements with him on a topic of discussion by avoiding controversy or by infusing flexibility in opinion. Positive politeness strategy is thus practised to 'oil the wheel of conversation'.

Besides highlighting the social variables, such as the social distance between a speaker and a hearer and the power hierarchy between them, which prompt the speaker to make a relevant choice of politeness strategy, Brown and Levinson's model also refers to some linguistic possibilities to achieve the protection of 'face' of the interlocutors. Nominalised subject ensures degree of formality and negative politeness in English. Quoting Ross (1973) the authors maintain, "Quite unexpectedly, we noticed that in English, degrees of negative politeness (or at least formality) run hand in hand with degrees of nouniness" (p207). 'Creaky voice' is a feature of positive politeness and 'high pitch' represents negative politeness in some languages. " We predict therefore that sustained high pitch (maintained over a number of utterances) will be a feature of negative-politeness usage, and creaky voice a feature of positive-politeness usage, and that a reversal of these associations will not occur in any culture." (p.268) Modals and pronouns also have some role to play. The linguistic features corresponding to face saving politeness are not uniformly present across languages but do exist as language specifics.

The empirical evidence from different languages and culture makes the model convincing. It may not offer any usable manual for politeness analysis but leaves sufficient scattered guidelines for exploring politeness phenomena. Brown and Levinson's book *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* is a significant addition to the sociolinguistic archive.