Examining   the universality of Brown and Levinsons' Politeness model In the Arabic Gulf Context

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Abstract

Brown and Levinson proposed a model of politeness, aiming to put forward a universal model for acting politely. This model has been widely discussed and criticised in the fields of pragmatics and discourse analysis, with the main critique of the model of politeness being put forward by two Japanese researchers, Matsumoto and Ide, and by the Chinese researchers, Gu and Mao. They argue that Brown and Levinson's model is western biased and does not represent politeness norms found all over the world (Fukushima, 2000). In this paper, the universality of the model is discussed, referring to the Gulf Arabic culture and related literature about the way Arabic speakers perform politeness. The argument of the paper is in favour of the model and supports its universality. The paper starts with a review of the model and then presents the critique, followed by information on the Gulf Arabic way of doing politeness; this is to be tested by collecting and rating some Gulf Arabic speakers' responses to a set of cases in a questionnaire.

Key words : Politeness – Brown and Levinson model of Politeness

Academic Disciplines: Discourse Analysis – Politeness – Intercultural Communication

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1. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson's model of politeness:

Brown and Levinson postulate that their model of politeness is based on the notion of face; they refer to Goffman's definition of face as the self-image a person tries to convey, and the perception of this image within social interactions (Goffman, 1972). They also derive this notion from the English folk term of face as something that may be lost or saved. Thus, it is "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson, 1999, p. 323). They describe it as being either negative or positive. Negative face is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction"; it is the wants of a member of a society to not be impeded. On the other hand, positive face is the member's wants to be desirable by others or "the positive consistent self- image...claimed in the interaction" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). They consider face to be a want of every member from another within the same group.

During the interaction, people act in order to avoid or emphasise their wants; they do face threatening acts (FTAs) to preserve and satisfy (negative FTAs) or to damage and ignore the wants of the addressee (positive FTAs). These acts can be either verbal or non-verbal. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people use four strategies to express politeness in their acts:

1- On record: an actor does an act to minimize a FTA, with a clear awareness from the participant as to what the intention will lead to, e.g. promising; in the utterance *I will come tomorrow*, this promise commits the actor to do a future act without ambiguity in the speech.

2- Off record: if there is a level of ambiguity in the act, this causes misleading in the intention of the communication. It occurs when using metaphors, rhetorical speech, or when there is no response.

3- Positive politeness: it occurs if the actor indicates that the wants of the addressee are shared and commonly held. This is used to convey that he/she is a member of the group and that they share the same rights and duties. It is a direct way of expressing the wants with a level of mitigation through the acknowledgment of sharing the wants.

4- Negative politeness: it is an avoidance-based strategy in which the actor tries to avoid imposing upon the addressee. This type of acting can be acted using different strategies, e.g. indirectness in speech or by using hedging to mitigate FTAs.

Brown and Levinson propose this theory of how people do politeness, considering their framework to be universally-applied to cultures all over the world. They also argue that the actor's choice of any of these strategies is affected by different factors. According to them, these factors are sociological variables. They are **the social distance (D)** between the speaker and the hearer (their relation is symmetric), **the relative power (P)** of the S and the H (the relation is asymmetric), and **the absolute ranking (R);** this is a culture-specific variable.

They argue that the **weightiness** (W) of an FTA (x) is determined by the different variables. This is illustrated by the following formula:

$$Wx = D(S, H) + P(S, H) + Rx$$

In this formula, **Wx** is the weightiness of the FTA, **D(S, H)** is the social distance between the actors, **P** is the power that affects the relation between them as one may be hierarchically higher than the other, and **R** is the extent of the ranking in which the FTA is considered to be an imposition in the culture of the actors (Brown and Levinson 1999, pp. 332-333).

2. Critique of the model:

Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has been investigated widely across the field of pragmatics. Many researchers have argued about the universality of Brown and Levinson's politeness model. The main critiques have been conducted by Japanese researchers (Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989: cited in Eelen, 2001) and by Chinese researchers (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994: cited in ibid). These critiques have mainly argued about the negative strategies and the notion of face as a universal representation of politeness.

2.1 Japanese researchers' critiques:

Some Japanese researchers have criticised the universality of politeness theory as it is western-biased. They argue that the notion of face that Brown and Levinson have used to explain the norm of politeness does not represent politeness in Japanese culture. Matsumoto (1988) claims that the interpretation of the notion of face negatively affects the norm of politeness in Japan. She argues that the explanation of negative face as the want to be unimpeded is not appropriate with the way Japanese speakers act. According to her, this explanation of negative face suits the individuality of the western culture where individual wants strongly dominate. In contrary, she claims that Japanese people consider the interference of the society and act by trying to show a level of dependence on the group. In addition, she claims that imposition is used by Japanese speakers to "humble themselves and place themselves in a lower position" (Matsumoto, 1988, p. 410). This means that Japanese speakers do not perform imposition to minimize FTAs. She also claims that indirectness in Japanese causes misunderstanding rather than expressing politeness; she proposes that Japanese speakers may be misled due to indirectness in requests and responses. She considers Japanese to be a straight and direct language, and that this is not related to FTAs; rather, it is a convention in Japan where directness may apply a high level of politeness.

Another researcher argues for the universality of Brown and Levinson's model. Ide (1989) claims that there are two ways to express politeness in Japanese culture. The first is where the actor has the willingness to mitigate his interaction with

politeness norms. In other words, the actor has the chance to do politeness. In contrast, the other type is determined by the linguistic forms (discernment). This type is obligatory and the actor does not have a chance to minimize politeness norms in the interaction; he/she is forced to use them even if he/she does not intend to be polite. This type of politeness is oriented by the speech tradition away from the actor's "rational intention" (Ide, 1989). She also argues that the use of honorific forms in Japanese is obligatory; the actor's will of using non-honorific or honorific forms is determined conventionally by tradition. According to her, factors like age, gender, and the status of the person will force the actor to interact using a set of honorific forms in the interaction, even if politeness is not intended.

2.2 Chinese researchers' critiques:

Some Chinese researchers have criticised Brown and Levinson's model, sharing the same argument as the Japanese researchers. These researchers (Gu, 1990; Mao, 1994: cited in Eelen, 2001) explain the notion of face as an image of the group rather than as standing for the individual. Hence, individuals aim to save the face of the group. This is the same perspective shared by the Japanese researchers. They still hold the view of the face representing the individuality of the western culture and they consider China as a collective society where individuals consider their wants and needs as being part of the groups which they belong to. In addition, Mao (1994, cited in ibid) refers to the norm of face as relating to **prestige or reputation** and how an actor can be respected in the community. Mao (ibid) argues for two different levels for the way the notion of face is interpreted in the model, and the Chinese way of understanding it. Brown and Levinson's model individually represents the actor, while the Chinese researchers assume the group and the actor to both be a part of the society.

3. Arabic and politeness theory:

Previously in this paper, politeness theory was introduced and then the critique on this theory by Japanese and Chinese researchers was provided. In this section, The research tried to test to what extent Brown and Levinson's model can be considered as universal and can be applied to Arabic culture. First, in all Arabic language varieties, it is common to refer to face as something that can be lost or saved. This may refer to the Arabic proverb "hafith ma'a alwajeh", which literally means "to save the water of the face" and refers to the avoidance of embarrassment. Thus, it is possible to propose that the notion of face in the model represents the norms of politeness in Arabic. Regarding the individuality that affects the model, Fukushima (2000) argues that with the spread of the western culture and its domination in the media, it is not valid to argue about the individual and collective values in eastern culture (Chinese and Japanese). Thus, I would doubt the claims of the Japanese and Chinese researchers about the westernization of the term 'face'.

Matsumoto (1988) argues that indirectness may cause misunderstanding and that negative face does not imply a higher level of politeness in the interaction. Regarding the Arabic culture, Nelson et al (2002) conducted a study to analyse the indirect and direct communication strategies used by Egyptian Arabic and US English speakers. They argue that Arabic speakers use the norm of "Musayara", which literally means "going with" and refers to trying to act in a way to avoid threat, together with being harmonious and emphasizing the wants of others. This norm also exists in the Saudi Arabic term "Mojarat". This strategy of acting is negative, as it indirectly avoids FTAs and mitigates the interaction. In addition, Nelson et al (2002) found that both Egyptian Arabic and US American speakers use the same strategies of indirectness to minimize FTAs, such as giving reasons and making statements of negative willingness. They also found that the choices of Arabic speakers are determined by the status of the hearer; the higher the status the hearer has, then the more indirect the speaker acts. This may be interpreted as indicating that indirectness results in a higher degree of politeness in the discourse in Arabic culture. This is because it confirms the postulation of Alaoui (2011); in his comparsion between English and Moroccan Arabic speakers in their requesting, offering, and giving thanks, she found that "the more indirect S makes his/her request, the more polite s/he is" (Alaoui, 2011, p. 9). This is opposite to Matsumoto's (1988) argument that indirectness may cause misunderstanding. Moreover, this politeness strategy matches the negative politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's model. Alaoui (2011) noted some universal features from the way participants interacted in her study. She found that both Arabic Moroccan and English speakers are trying to avoid damaging the hearer's face by mitigating their acts with requests, offers, and thanks. She also found that the participants from both groups intended to pay more attention to negative politeness strategies in order to be more polite.

In his study about apologies in Arabic and English, Al Zumor (2011) collected data which shows a high frequency of using regret to apologise in both groups of participants, English and Arabic. Their intention is to express politeness in the task they have. This also supports Alaoui's (2011) postulation about the universality of negative politeness in regrets as a strategy for doing negative politeness.

4. Methodology:

In this section, the points of the critique against Brown and Levinson's model was tested upon Gulf Arabic[1] data. A questionnaire (Discourse Completion Task)was utlized in this paper. Discourse completion task or DCT is widely used in seek of collecting data forthe analysis of the actor's speech act. It provides deeper view about the actor's language and the strategies he\she opts when they are immersed in a converstion (Bergman and Kasper, 1993 and Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984).

The questionaire was conducted in a way to test how they act politely in different situations with different social variables which may affect their decision concerning the strategy they opt to use. The main aims the study focuses on are the points

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[1] By Gulf Arabic, I mean the Arabic dialects that are used in Arabic Gulf countries

that the Japanese and Chinese researchers have criticised. The first question tries to test what politeness strategy they may opt to use if their faces are highly threatened. The second question tries to check the variability in the way they address a person with a higher status in his/her presence and absence. The last question aims to test the strategies they would opt to use in minimal FTAs. These are the points the questionaire aims to test (Appendix, Section 2).

4.1 The Sample:

Participants of The present paper are Arab gulf students who are enrolled at the University of Sheffield. Moreover, they all are permanent residents in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain and completed their education in public schools. They are Five females and five males. They were asked to reply to The questionnaire as if they were taking part in an oral conversation.

4.2 Data analysis:

Referring to the data in Table 1, both male and female speakers use negative politeness strategies more frequently than positive ones. They both used negative politeness 13 times and used positive politeness strategies twice. It is noted that they intended to use negative politeness in the first question, as they are expected to portray a higher level of politeness. In Table 2, the most frequent strategies are requests, which occur 14 times, and excuses, which occur 10 times. This is expected as both of these strategies are types of negative politeness. A quite frequent strategy in the data that can be counted as a kind of mitigative phrase to minimize the threat is using religious phrases. For example, praying or asking for a reward from the god can be interpreted as a negative strategy as it is an attempt to indirectly make the request. It occurs more frequently with multi-strategies act. This strategy has been used more often among males. It is also noted that males use more types of strategies than females. They use hedges and questions, and females do not.

In Table 3, most of the time the participants use more than one strategy; they use these multi-strategies acts in cases where they should portray a higher level of politeness. Similarly , most of the participants have used more than one strategy to ask for help. In addition, Table 4 shows the way of addressing their manager at work in his/her presence and absence. The participants addressed their manager differently if the manager was present compared to if they were absent; in some cases, however, they still addressed him/her in the same way. Females use different forms of address more often than males. The addressing phrases used by both are different, with males using a local way of addressing the person. This is performed by calling him/her with the son's name. This type of addressing phrase is common and is considered to show a high level of politeness in Gulf Arabic.

4.3 Results and Discussion:

The data shows that the participant intended to act politely using strategies of negative politeness. This matches Alaoui's (2011) study, where she found that participants of groups intended to use negative politeness to act politely, and thus she postulates that there are universal features. These findings of both the data in the questionnaire and in Alaoui's (2011) study prove the universality of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. In addition, Fukada and Asato (2004) argue that even in Japanese, indirectness could be used. Matsumoto's claim is not valid as Japanese speakers may use indirect acts to achieve a certain level of politeness.

Referring to Table 2, the frequency of using strategies like requests and excuses confirms that Gulf Arabic speakers mitigate their acts using these negative politeness strategies. It is also noted that males used these strategies more than females. Thus, gender is a factor to be considered in the acts, especially for a gendered culture like Gulf Arabic[2]. Moreover, both males and females have used religious phrases to avoid threatening face; it occurs more often in the first case when the level of threat is higher than the rest. These phrases could be considered as hedges or indirect acts. However, it is common among Arabic speakers to use such a strategy to minimize the threat. This strategy is used by males more often; it is also a negative politeness strategy.

The participants address their manager differently in his/her presence and absence. Three out of ten speakers used the same way of addressing while the rest used a different way of addressing. It is worth noting that some of the male participants have emphasized during the filling in of the questionaire that there are differences in addressing if the manager is male or female. They said that with a male, they would call them by their son's name, e.g. "abo Ahamd", which means the father of Ahamd. This is a common way to address males in Gulf Arabic,and conveys a high level of politeness towards the addressee. This also opposes the claims of Ide, who stated that Japanese speakers use the same addressing phrases, "discernment politeness" in the absence and presence of the addressee. However, Fukada and Asato (2004) declined his claim, saying that even Japanese speakers may sometimes not stick to discernment; they may use different phrases if the level of threat is lower. This also confirms that Ide's claim is not valid.

The use of multi-strategies is quite frequent for both genders. As shown in Table 4, they both try to use more than one strategy in one case, and this can also be considered as an attempt to minimize FTAs. This is especially true in the first case where there is a higher level of FTAs. This data that has been collected and analysed proves, in my opinion, the universality of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness. Moreover, it supports their postulation that their model represents the politeness norms in my culture.

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[2] Gulf Arabic has obvious different levels and items to express gender, thus I called it a gendered language and culture, as workplaces and houses separate the two genders.

5. Conclusion:

In this paper, the universality of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness has been discussed and the results confirm its validity. This refutes the argument of the Japanese and Chinese researchers that it is western-biased and does not represent all cultures. In this study, I found some Gulf Arabic specific phrases which may be generalised over all Arabic varieties. These are the use of religious phrases- these may be considered as indirect acts or hedges; and the way a male addresses his manager. In addition, gender factors are something that need more investigation. I would recommend further studies on these three points.

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Tasks	Negative politeness	Positive politeness
Male	13	2
Female	13	2
Total	26	4

Table 2

Strategies	Male	Female	Total
Request	5	9	14
Excuse	5	5	10
Order	2	3	5
Religious phrases	4	3	7
Hedges	1	-	1
Questions	1	-	1

Table 3

	Male	Female	Total
One strategy	4	5	9
Multi-strategies	11	10	21

Table 4

	Male	Female	Total
The same addressing phrase	2	1	3
Different addressing phrase	3	4	7

Appendix 2

Questionaire form:

Gender........................... Country of permanent resident …………………………

Which School did you study in?   a. Public   b. Private

<u>Answer the following question based on your mother tongue and cultural background :</u>

1- You want to ask for help from a person who has a higher status than you in your job?

What would you like to say?

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....

2- You want to address your manager in your job. How you would say that if it is in his/ her presence? And how you would say it in his/her absence?

....

....

3- You want to ask your friend to make a cup of tea for you. How would you say that?

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4- How would you say it to a waiter if you are in a restaurant?

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