

Social and Cultural Factors in Expressing Politeness in English and Romanian

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Abstract:

Even if the Romanian language, on the one hand, and the English language, on the other hand, have different historical backgrounds, with no genetic relatedness, there are quite a number of similarities in expressing politeness in both languages. Our present survey is focused on the investigation of politeness from the socio-cultural point of view, emphasizing the similarities and differences that exist between the two languages. We have discussed the main linguistic theoretical aspects regarding this phenomenon, from different points of view: the conversational view, the face-saving view and politeness viewed as a conversational contract. Afterwards, we have approached in detail the problem of linguistic politeness, highlighting the social and cultural factors that have the strongest impact on choosing a certain way of addressing. We have come to the conclusion that the similarities and differences that exist among the Romanian and English languages as regards politeness expression are triggered by various value systems and by different cultural and social systems.

Keywords: politeness, social, cultural, pragmatic, linguistic

Expressing politeness represents one of the most important linguistic strategies in order to achieve social harmony. Since language is the most important tool by the medium of which social life functions, achieving social harmony refers to the mutual agreement of the interlocutors to make use of different ways of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, in order to be polite. The principle of politeness may be defined as a certain

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unanimously accepted belief according to which an individual should behave in conformity with what is expected of him, in other words he/she should have an attitude of deference, humility, sympathy and subtlety.

Social factors are the ones which have the strongest impact on choosing a certain way of addressing, based on a particular theory of politeness. Thus, the differences that exist among definite patterns of linguistic behaviour are triggered by various value systems, by different cultural and social systems. The native speakers of a language also acquire, alongside with their innate linguistic ability, a specific predisposition to a value system. Using the principles of politeness appropriately is one of the last stages in the process of learning a foreign language. That's why non-native speakers of a language assimilate these principles less easily than learning the vocabulary and the rules of grammar of that particular language. Consequently, we can speak of an unintentional rudeness, which manifests itself especially in the case of children and non-native speakers, which can lead to miscommunication.

1. The concept of politeness – some theoretical aspects

Although politeness is regarded by most linguists as a social phenomenon rather than a pragmatic one, the theories of politeness represent a widely debated topic in pragmatics. A combination between these two aspects (social and pragmatic), when studying politeness, is explained by the fact that the strategies of politeness underpin the establishment of social harmony within the verbal exchange. From the pragmatic point of view, the analysis of politeness is based on the study of speech acts in isolation, focusing on a particular speech act. On the other hand, as a social phenomenon, politeness is extensively analysed, with an emphasis on the social interaction instances which are in progress.

1.1. The conversational view on politeness

This conversational perspective on the theory of politeness has been amply discussed by R. Lakoff and G. Leech. The two linguists' analysis of major linguistic aspects of politeness is based on Grice's construct of conversational maxims. The Cooperative Principle (CP) formulated by

Grice (1975) was focused on “the effective exchange of information”, on the ways in which the communicative intention of the interlocutors is attained. Grice’s four maxims (Maxim of Quantity, Maxim of Quality, Maxim of Relation, Maxim of Manner) represent the standards of correctness any utterance is striving to achieve and on the basis of which the meaning of any utterance is interpreted.

These maxims are compatible with Lakoff’s point of view, since both linguists believe that, in order to render a message clearly, one should always take into account the interlocutor, one should always be polite and never be offensive to others. There is a hierarchy of the types of sentences, as regards different levels of politeness. Let’s take the following example: a mother wants to tell her son to clean his room. We can choose among the following types of sentences:

- a. *How long has it been since you cleaned up your room?*
- b. *This room is a mess.*
- c. *Clean up your room!*

Analysing the examples above, we can notice that the imperative sentence is the less polite of all, yet with the highest perlocutionary effect. As illocutionary acts, the interrogative forms are weaker than the declarative ones and the declarative sentences are weaker than the imperative ones. To conclude, Lakoff believes that politeness is the instrument that can tell us which is the best way of expressing a certain imperative idea.

As far as the rules of politeness are concerned, Lakoff formulates three principles: the Formality Rule, the Hesitancy Rule and the Equality or Camaraderie Rule, according to which the speaker must not impose himself on the addressee and he should not invade his territory. Each rule corresponds to a different communicative situation, characterized by specific utterances: the Formality Rule refers to the social distance between the speaker and the hearer (Don’t impose; Remain aloof); the Hesitancy Rule is applied in the case of the interlocutors of approximately the same social background (Allow the addressee his options); according to the Equality Rule, the speaker has to be nice and friendly to the interlocutor, as a sign of courtesy (Make the listener feel good). Lakoff believes that, by combining these three rules competently, one can successfully get out of a situation in which telling the truth and expressing oneself politely are in direct conflict.

Starting from Grice's construct of conversational principles, Leech (1983) formulates the Principle of Politeness (PP), which is constructed in a very similar format to Grice's Cooperative Principle and is analysed in terms of six maxims: the Tact Maxim (submaxims: Minimize cost to other; Maximize benefit to other); the Generosity Maxim (submaxims: Minimize benefit to self; Maximize cost to self); the Approbation Maxim (submaxims: Minimize dispraise of other; Maximize praise of other); the Modesty Maxim (submaxims: Minimize praise of self; Maximize praise of others); the Agreement Maxim (submaxims: Minimize disagreement between self and other; Maximize agreement between self and other); the Sympathy Maxim (submaxims: Minimize the antipathy between self and other; Maximize the sympathy between self and other). It goes without saying that these principles of politeness are never thoroughly fulfilled. We can only speak of different degrees of compliance. Maintaining a certain equilibrium in using them is even essential, since their excessive implementation may only result in miscommunication. For instance, using the Modesty Maxim in excess is not a good way to express politeness, on the contrary, it shall only lead to an insincere attitude, which becomes rather an obstacle in reaching a good interpersonal communication. The attention is mostly focused on the addressee (the other) and this is the reason for which those maxims which refer to the speaker's attitude towards the *other* are more important than those which refer to the speaker's attitude towards the *self*.

According to Leech, reaching a polite discourse depends on three factors: the ratio between the addressee's costs and benefits, the degree of indirect expression and the extent to which the interlocutor is given the opportunity of allowing options.

1.2. The face-saving view

The study of politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon was very well developed by Brown and Levinson (1979, 1987). They have analysed different languages from different cultures and concluded that politeness is a universal cultural phenomenon. Brown and Levinson make the distinction between two types of cultures: cultures which are based on positive politeness (which focuses on solidarity and close relationships between the

interlocutors) and cultures which are based on negative politeness (which focuses on formality and high social distance).

The face-saving view initiated by Brown and Levinson refers to the concept of *face* (public self-image). The face is meant to designate the individual self-esteem. Thus, the two linguists distinguish between two types of face: positive face and negative face. While the positive face reflects the individual's desire to receive approval from those around him, the negative face is nothing but the reflection of the individual's wish not to be disturbed by the others.

Relative social distance is connected to face wants. Consequently, within everyday social interaction, the speaker may say something which preserves his face and/or that of the addressee, or something that threatens it. In order to avoid or at least to diminish these face threatening acts, Brown and Levinson proposed to implement a series of politeness strategies: *bald-on record*, *positive politeness strategies*, *negative politeness strategies* and *off-record*.

In a *bald-on record* strategy, the speaker is not making any effort in minimizing the threats to the hearer's threats. The speaker will most likely embarrass or make the hearer uncomfortable due to addressing him directly or through direct command.

The *off-record* strategy involves some serious indirectness: the speaker avoids saying the potentially face-threatening act altogether. Such strategy consists of: giving hints, being vague, being sarcastic or joking.

Positive politeness strategies are intended to reduce the threat to the listener's positive face. Positive politeness strategies include: finding common ground, using statements of friendship, juxtaposing criticism with compliments. This type of strategies is aimed to make the listeners feel good about themselves and avoid conflict or offense by emphasizing friendliness and politeness.

Negative politeness strategies are oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. Such strategies include: hedging, minimizing the imposition, being indirect, apologizing, giving deference, being pessimistic, using questions rather than commands.

1.3. Politeness viewed as a conversational contract

The conversational-contract view on politeness was proposed by Fraser (1990). The usage of the linguistic methods of expressing politeness is based on the existence of a silent agreement between the interlocutors and on the acknowledgment of each participant in a conversational situation of the correct politeness strategy that should be adopted in the given situation. Fraser subscribes not only to Grice's construct of conversational principles but also to the concept of *face*, proposed by Brown and Levinson. Just like Brown and Levinson, Fraser believes that choosing a certain form of linguistic politeness is triggered by a sense of responsibility on the part of the transmitter in relation to the receiver. Yet, Fraser explains this kind of responsibility in a different way: choosing a certain politeness strategy is not triggered so much by the desire to *save face* but rather by the desire to conform to the Cooperative Principle (CP). Fraser believes that conversational agreements are always relative, depending on the conversational situations specific to a particular moment.

Each and every one of the several theories on the study of politeness that we have covered so far claims that they provide a holistic approach to the linguistic politeness phenomenon. Nevertheless, each theory can be subject to objections, especially in those cases in which a different language (or culture) from those under discussion is analysed. This does not mean that the previously discussed theories are incorrect, but none of them can claim to possess an exhaustive character.

Consequently, a general theory on the study of politeness is possible only if we might identify certain general aspects of politeness as a cultural phenomenon. A polite language is not only the reflection of the structure of a certain language but also the reflection of some particular cultural characteristics. That is why a pragmatic theory on linguistic politeness should take into account the cultural elements specific to the speakers of the language subject to research. We might as well say that polite speech acts constitute themselves as true cultural acts.

To sum up, all the theories on the study of politeness covered so far are relevant as far as our comparative survey is concerned, in the sense that a parallel between English and Romanian which has as a main topic

linguistic politeness highlights one or several aspects which have been much debated by linguists.

2. The socio-cultural dimension of politeness as it is expressed in English and Romanian

Politeness can be seen as a social phenomenon based on the social values of a particular community. According to Brown and Levinson, three social factors are involved in deciding how to be polite: *social distance*, *power* and *rank of imposition*.

Social distance refers to the proximity of the interlocutors. The level of politeness differs according to whether the interlocutors are intimate or not, based on their age, gender, social status, degree of familiarity, the frequency degree of their verbal exchange, etc. The bigger the social distance is, the higher the politeness degree is. Social distance is especially relevant for direct speech acts: ordering, requesting, demanding, questioning.

Power refers to the relationship between the interlocutors, which may be one of different types: a relationship of equality (among friends, colleagues, etc.), a relationship of superiority (between employers and employees, teachers and students and so on) or a relationship of inferiority (between employers and employees, teachers and students, etc.). So, when communicating, the speaker will be less polite if he/she is in a position of greater power than the listener, and vice-versa.

Rank of imposition is related to the content of the utterance as imposing to the listener. The speaker will perform a more polite utterance when he/she has a bigger request or wants something.

All these social factors are strictly related to cultural values. Each culture “has some systematic and repetitive characteristics which make up a cultural pattern, reflecting the conditions that contribute to the perception, way of thinking and lifestyle of a community.”³ Depending on the type of culture, there are several factors that shape the social values and also the profile of a verbal exchange. Psychologist Geert Hofstede (1980) identified four such factors that could distinguish one culture from another.

³Neagu, Mariana, Pisoschi, Claudia, *Fundamentals of Semantics and Pragmatics*, Craiova, Universitaria Publishing House, 2018, p. 194.

a. *Individualism versus collectivism*: while individualism is focused on the rights and concerns of each person, with particular emphasis on independence and personal identity, collectivism stresses the importance of the community, focusing on unity and altruism.

From this point of view, the Romanian culture is a mixture of individualism and collectivism. During the communist period, nationalism became the new religion. Romania was a collectivist nation par excellence, where people used to sacrifice their own happiness and welfare for the greater good of the group. After the revolution of 1989, there has been a revival of the Romanian society, through a revision of the collective system of values and norms. Thus, nowadays, the Romanian culture seems to swiftly heading towards individualism, reorienting itself to the Western individualist culture.

The social distance is directly related to the cultural dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Romania and Great Britain deal with this issue differently.

As a collectivist culture, the Romanian culture is characterized by a close distance of communication. Thus, in order to reduce the difference between person and environment, Romanians tend to use indirect meanings in their speech. An indirect style implies managing verbal and non-verbal speech, and focusing on facial expressions. Among the social practices related to Romanians' non-verbal speech we can mention: accompanying the greetings by shaking hands between men; kissing women's hands by men; kissing on the cheek as a sign of closeness; patting on the shoulder as a sign of camaraderie; touching the interlocutor as a sign of discourse proximity; offering gifts as a sign of appreciation, interest, respect or in order to win someone's good will, etc.

On the other hand, Great Britain reflects an individualistic culture. Thus, to establish contact with a particular person, the British have to shorten the distance with the help of different communication strategies. By making use of positive politeness, more precisely the politeness of rapprochement, the British aim at demonstrating a positive attitude of the speaker to the interlocutor. This kind of communicative approach is often noticeable in greetings and farewells, which are highlighted by verbosity and verbal

demonstration of disposition, good will and attention. This is done in order to reduce the distance and to establish contact with unfamiliar people.

b. *Power distance* – refers to the perceived degree of inequality among people. A high-power distance culture encourages bureaucracy and focuses on social hierarchy. There is a greater centralization of power, a lot of importance being placed on status and rank. On the other hand, a low power distance culture places the individual close to power. The power is shared and is widely dispersed; the individuals do not accept those situations in which power is distributed unequally.

Romania is a country which favours high power distance in the sense that the Romanian society is structured as a pyramid, the peak of this pyramid being the ideal destination of most Romanians. As far as the concept of politeness is concerned, Romanians are making use of the negative politeness strategies in order to maintain power distance and to respect status difference. An example in this sense might be the usage of the title + last name to the superiors or older people we do not know very well. Negative politeness strategies are used by Romanians to pay people respect and to avoid intruding them. Also, the presence of polite pronouns represents a strong argument for a high-power distance in the Romanian culture.

At the other pole, the Anglo-Saxon society is favouring small power distance; subordinates consider superiors to be the same kind of people as they are, and vice-versa. That is why the British appeal to positive politeness strategies in order to show solidarity towards the others, to make their interlocutors feel good or to make them feel that their values are shared. Positive politeness is used to extend intimacy, to imply common ground and to share wants. When, for instance, the superior suggests that the subordinate should use his / her first name when addressing to him / her, this is a positive politeness strategy, expressing solidarity and minimizing status difference.

c. *Uncertainty avoidance* – refers to the extent to which a culture's members feel threatened by uncertain, unknown situations or embrace these situations. High uncertainty avoidance cultures behave in strict manners and have less inclination towards change. On the other hand, low uncertainty avoidance cultures accept uncertainty in life and tolerate the unusual; members of these cultures approach change through adaptability, pragmatism and flexibility.

The Romanian culture favours high uncertainty avoidance. With respect to the verbal exchange, Romanians are inclined to use direct, explicit and precise language to convey their messages. In this respect, they tend to use more formal, polite and respectful expressions to show deference and authority. Nevertheless, some members of the Romanian society may also avoid using irony or sarcasm, as they may be perceived as ambiguous or disrespectful.

The Anglo-Saxon society, on the other hand, shows low uncertainty avoidance, by using indirect, implicit and vague language to convey their messages and intentions. They may also tend to use more informal, casual and friendly expressions to show equality, as well as ironic or sarcastic language so as to be perceived as playful or witty.

4. *Masculinity versus femininity*: while cultures that value masculinity are oriented towards ambition, assertiveness and money acquisition, cultures that value femininity are focused on cooperation, by stressing caring.

The Romanian culture, just like the Anglo-Saxon culture, is characterized by a fairly high degree of masculinity. Both countries tend to value competition and success and place less value on attributes like getting on well with others or being modest.

To Hofstede's social factors that shape the profile of a verbal exchange, we can add Hall's (1959) role of the context. In this respect, there are high context cultures and low context cultures.

Romania is regarded as a high context culture, in which context is more valued than words. Most of the communication is, in fact, non-verbal communication, relying mostly on voice tone, body language, facial expressions, eye contact, speech patterns and silence. Due to the indirect Romanian communication style, it is regarded as rude to simply answer *No* when refusing something. Rejection may be expressed much more softly, with phrases like *I don't think this is a good idea; I think you'd better ...; I see, but ...*, etc. In order to emphasize something while communicating, Romanians are inclined to raise their voice, use a lot of gestures and express their feelings freely. To summarize, Romanians' style of communication does not put too much store on what people say, but on how they say it.

At the other pole, Great Britain is regarded as a low context culture. Most of the meaning is in the words uttered, not in the context in which they

are spoken. The British, just like any other members of low context cultures, believe in honest answers and have trust in what people say. Furthermore, there is a preference for the written word, unlike Romanians, for whom the spoken word is favoured over the written word.

Apart from all these social factors that influence the profile of a verbal exchange, we can add: *formality versus informality, assertiveness and interpersonal harmony*⁴.

Formality versus informality: while formal language has a strict word selection, including titles or honorifics, informal language allows the use of non-standard forms, colloquial vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, first name address or informal greetings. In this respect, both Romanian and English combine elements from formal and informal ways of expressing. Positive and negative aspects of politeness are representative in this sense. Positive politeness may be seen as a way of expressing informality, since it is an appeal to solidarity towards others, an attempt to make the hearer feel good or to make him/her feel that his/her values are shared. Positive politeness is also used to extent intimacy and to imply common ground. For instance, when the superior suggests that the subordinate should use first name when addressing to him/her, this is a positive politeness move, expressing solidarity and minimizing status difference. On the other hand, negative politeness may be seen as a way of expressing formality, since it is a way of expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status difference. An example in this sense might be the use of title + last name to the superiors or older people we do not know well. Since equality is much valued in the Anglo-Saxon culture, the English language is mostly characterized by informality, addressing each other directly. In Great Britain, it is a polite way to address others by their first name even though the other side might be a senior. People who know each other well use the first name address in both informal and formal situations. The Romanian culture encourages closeness between the interlocutors, tending to use familiar speech, by levelling out the differences regarding the age or the social status. Formal language is only used in official events or in the cases when the interlocutors do not know each other. Even in this situation, as the

⁴Neagu, Mariana, Pisoschi, Claudia, *ibid.*, p. 195.

interlocutors get closer, they may give up formal language and make use of an informal way of addressing.

Assertiveness in communication is the ability to directly state your feelings and needs in a respectful manner. Voice tone, eye contact and body posture are important parts of assertive communication. The Anglo-Saxon society tends to be rather assertive. Using *I* or *me* statements (like *I believe, I want, I feel*), avoid saying *sorry* too often, avoid feeling uncertain (*I guess that ...*), saying *no* are all examples of assertive behaviour. Nevertheless, there are situations in which, in order to be more polite and win the interlocutor's willingness, people may use non-assertive markers (moods, lexical items, modal verbs). The Romanian society, on the other hand, tends to be rather non-assertive. Having the desire to be accepted, the need to be liked, allowing others to choose for them, speaking quietly, avoiding eye contact are characteristics of a non-assertive communication style. This type of communication can lead to feelings of frustration and self-esteem. Unclear communication is not effective in achieving a result.

Interpersonal harmony refers to the equilibrium that should be maintained throughout a conversation by avoiding conflict. This implies that we make use of some special linguistic means to make the conversation run smoothly. In the process of communication, the interlocutors are interested in saving both their own "face" and the "face" of their partner, thus creating a balanced communication and maintaining harmony. In the Anglo-Saxon culture, *harmony* is reflected in the approval of the other side. People would not directly deny or refuse others, otherwise they will appear impolite. In Romania, *harmony* not only reflects the approval of the other side, but also includes flattery and praises to the other side. People would normally depreciate themselves and give the other side positive face.

To summarize, taking into account the social and cultural factors in expressing politeness, we might say that the British culture is an individualistic, assertive, masculine culture, favouring small power distance, informality, except for official events and showing low uncertainty avoidance. At the other pole, the Romanian culture is a mixture of individualism and collectivism, a combination between formality and informality; it is a non-assertive, masculine culture, favouring high power distance and showing high uncertainty avoidance.

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