



Politeness and Grice's Maxims

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Abstract: This paper reviews four current approaches to an account of politeness: the social-norm view; the conversational-maxim view; the face-saving view; and the conversational-contract view. A characterization is given for each, followed by a discussion of certain salient aspects of the approach. While none of the views is considered adequate, the face-saving view is seen as the most clearly articulated and most thoroughly worked out, therefore providing the best framework within which to raise the crucial questions about politeness that must now be addressed.

There has been a great deal of interest in politeness in pragmatics, and just as definitions of pragmatics vary, so too do definitions of politeness. Not only is the term used in different ways, but the term itself is not defined. As Watts, Ide and Ehlich observe:

... one of the oddest things about politeness research is that the term “politeness” itself is either not explicitly defined at all or else taken to be a consequence of rational social goals such as maximising the benefit to self and other, minimising the face-threatening nature of a social act, displaying adequate proficiency in the accepted standards of social etiquette, avoiding conflict, making sure that the social interaction runs smoothly, etc.

Another difficulty is pointed out by Kasper, noting the different meanings of the term in ordinary parlance and pragmatics. In the former,

... ‘politeness’ refers to proper social conduct and tactful consideration for others.

whereas in the latter,

... ‘politeness’ as a technical term in linguistic pragmatics refers to a broader, substantially more democratic concept. Since the object of pragmatic inquiry is linguistic action, ‘politeness’ as a pragmatic notion refers to ways in which linguistic action is carried out – more specifically, ways in which the relational function in linguistic action is expressed.

LoCastro points out that the term “politeness” is frequently confused with related folk terms like “etiquette” and “manners” and it has folk meanings that are not clearly distinguishable from its more technical or formal meanings. Indeed, the definition of “polite” in Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary is in line with the folk meaning of the term, in the sense of referring to good manners and social correctness.

Someone who is polite has good manners and behaves in a way that is socially correct and considerate of other people’s feelings.

Polite describes things that you say or do simply because it is socially correct to do or say them, rather than because you mean them sincerely.

In Britain “politeness” is typically used to describe negative politeness, which is presumed to be “a good thing.” In this respect, I believe that the Japanese translation of “politeness,” teinei, also has a

similar connotation. According to Hori (1986), the Japanese concept of “being polite” includes only negative politeness.

These views of politeness coincide with what Watts et al. (1992a) have termed “first-order” politeness in their scheme in which they distinguish between the folk and pragmatic definitions of the term, the latter being “second-order” politeness in their classification. Second-order politeness is located within a theory of social behaviour and language use, and is not equated with any moral or psychological disposition towards being nice to one’s interlocutor. It is in this pragmatic sense that I will use the term.

For the purpose of this study, I take politeness to refer to the use of communication strategies intended to maintain mutual face and to achieve smooth communication, taking into account human relationships. The promoting and maintaining of politeness calls for displays of appropriate behaviour. What is considered to be appropriate varies from situation to situation and culture to culture, while personal values and tastes may also influence judgements of appropriateness.

Fraser reviews four current approaches to politeness: (1) the socialnorm view; (2) the conversational-maxim view; (3) the face-saving view; and (4) the conversational-contract view. In this section, these four views are used as a basis of reviewing theories of politeness.

The Social-norm View. According to Fraser (1990: 220), the first approach to politeness is the social-norm view which assumes that each society has a particular set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behavior, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is congruent with the norm, a negative evaluation (impoliteness-rudeness) when an action is not.

The social-norm view includes etiquette, manners, or social rules, i.e., what to do and what not to do. “This normative view considers politeness to be associated with speech style, whereby a higher degree of formality implies greater politeness” (Fraser, 1990: 221). The social-norm view corresponds to “first-order politeness” suggested by Watts et al. (1992a). According to them (1992a: 3), first-order politeness corresponds to the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups. It encompasses, in other words, commonsense notions of politeness. According to Fraser (1990: 221), “the socialnorm approach has few adherents among current researchers.” This may be because, as Watts et al. have pointed out, it is a commonsense notion, different from “second-order politeness,” which is a theoretical construct. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to take the social-norm view as a theoretical basis for this study.

The Conversational-maxim View. The second view of politeness is the conversational-maxim view which relies principally on the work of Grice (1975) and his foundation of the Cooperative Principle (CP). Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983) have adopted and elaborated Grice’s Cooperative Principle.

Grice’s (1975) paper “Logic and conversation” gave rise to the study of linguistic politeness within the framework of Anglo-American pragmatics and the ensuing attempt to develop second-order politeness concepts (Watts et al., 1992a: 3). It aims at representing and accounting for a certain subclass of “nonconventional implicatures” (also known as “conversational implicatures”) as “essentially connected with certain general features of discourse” (Grice, 1975: 45). These general features he embodied in what has become known as the Cooperative Principle. It is based on the following assumption:

Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. (Grice, 1975: 45)

On the basis of the above, Grice labels the following as the Cooperative Principle (CP).

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The Cooperative Principle entails four maxims, each of which further entails submaxims. Grice named these maxims after Kant's categories: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner, each of which is as follows (Grice, 1975: 45–46):

1. Quantity

- (1) Make your contribution as informative as required (for the purpose of the exchange).
- (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

2. Quality

- (1) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. Relation

Be relevant.

4. Manner

- (1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- (2) Avoid ambiguity.
- (3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- (4) Be orderly.

Discussing the CP and its maxims, Grice (1978: 113–114) says that:

I have suggested a Cooperative Principle and some subordinate maxims, with regard to which I have suggested: (i) that they are standardly (though not invariably) observed by participants in a talk exchange; and (ii) that the assumptions required in order to maintain the supposition that they are being observed (or so far as is possible observed) either at the level of what is said – or failing that, at the level of what is implicated - are in systematic correspondence with nonconventional implicata of the conversational type.

The cooperative principle and its associated conversational maxims constituted a part of a systematic philosophical theory of language which was predicated upon the assumption that the primary purpose of conversation is the maximally effective exchange of information.

Grice (1975: 48) expressed the desire to have a rational basis for the standard type of conversational practice:

I would like to be able to think of the standard type of conversational practice not merely as something that all or most do IN FACT follow but as something that it is REASONABLE for us to follow, that we SHOULD NOT abandon.

The important notion that Grice is trying to explicate is conversational rationality, although Grice (1989: 369) admits that:

... some refinement in our apparatus is called for. First, it is only certain aspects of our conversational practice which are candidates for evaluation, namely those which are crucial to its rationality ... it is the rationality or irrationality of conversational conduct which I have been concerned to track down rather than any more general characterization of conversational adequacy.

Grice admits some limitations, because in practice language does not always aim at a maximally effective exchange of communication. Some researchers have criticised the CP for this reason (e.g. Sifianou, 1992: 16). The CP has also been criticised from the viewpoint of the universality of the maxims, Hymes noting that:

It can reasonably be assumed that any community will have some orientation to the dimension of quality (truthfulness), of quantity (informativeness), of relevance, of manner (clarity). What the

orientation will be, and how complexly articulated in relation to kinds of person and context, would be an empirical question.

To sum up, although Grice's work has been subject to criticism, it has provided a basis for a conversational-maxim view, and has provided a foundation for Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to be discussed.

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