Politeness

Sara Mills
Research Professor of Linguistics, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

What is it?

Theorists and interactants tend to define politeness and impoliteness differently. For many theorists, politeness is a judgment made by others about interactional behavior, and may be a way of assessing whether an interactant's behavior is seen as appropriate to the community. An assessment of impoliteness therefore may be a way of judging someone as not conforming to group norms. Also, the function of judgments of politeness and impoliteness within interaction (the way assessments include or exclude interactants), plays a critical role. By contrast, interactants often define politeness as whether someone shows respect or empathy for others.

Who uses the concept?

The concepts of politeness and impoliteness have been used by linguists, primarily although not exclusively within pragmatics, and to a lesser extent by those in communication, psychology, or sociology.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

It is often in the area of politeness where miscommunication can take place in intercultural dialogue. In certain languages the use of directness is a way of exhibiting closeness to the interlocutor, as in Arabic and Hebrew. In other languages, indirectness is considered a way of showing respect and concern for others, as in English and Japanese. For all of these languages, directness or indirectness signals politeness to the interlocutor. However, when Arabic speakers learn English, they may transfer this use of directness, but find that rather than signalling closeness and friendliness, it

may be interpreted as brusque. In a similar way, if an English speaker learns Arabic and uses indirectness to convey respect, they may well be interpreted as distancing themselves from their interlocutor. Thus, knowledge of general norms within a language of how to convey politeness both in positive politeness (using expressions which indicate friendliness or social closeness) and negative politeness (using expressions which indicate respect and social distance) is important for successful intercultural dialogue.

What work remains?

Research still needs to investigate the way individuals learn what counts as polite and impolite. The resources of politeness obviously pre-date the speaker and hearer. Thus it would be worthwhile to investigate the way knowledge of what counts as polite or impolite is learned and modified by speakers and communities. Also worth investigating is the variety existing within communities about what counts as polite and impolite.

Resources

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