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TOWARDS A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO POLITENESS*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to argue for the possibility of a cognitive approach to politeness. Modern research on politeness was dominated by a strategic approach for several years: politeness was seen as a result of the rational need for balanced interpersonal relations, and politeness mechanisms were considered universal. However, the investigations carried out on different cultures soon began to show that things were not that simple: cultures strongly differ not only in forms, but also in the social meanings associated with various strategies, in the internal structure of speech acts, or in the expectations concerning verbal behaviour. The conclusion was easily drawn that politeness is a social matter, and hence culture-specific. As a consequence, politeness studies seem to have fallen into an unavoidable contradiction between universality and culture-specificity.

It is my purpose to explore to what extent cognitive pragmatics can provide a suitable framework to cope with such a contradiction. The notion of *frame* as an organized set of specific knowledge reveals itself as a useful tool. From such a perspective, evidence against universality is no longer crucial, and cultural differences regarding basic assumptions fit in quite naturally, so a new approach to the relationship between politeness and universality can be suggested.

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KEYWORDS

Cognitive pragmatics; politeness; specific knowledge; mental models; frames; relevance theory; universality; culture-specificity; intercultural (mis)communication

MODERN APPROACHES TO POLITENESS

Politeness has usually been conceived of as a series of signs of respect or deference whose use is determined by the social organization and the status of participants in the interaction. The knowledge of the principles which govern conversational etiquette was one of the most basic educational objectives, and a primordial characteristic of good manners. According to this view, politeness appeared to some people as a routine, a dispensable, old-fashioned, superficial form of behaviour.

Strategic Politeness and Universality

This is the reason why studies on politeness only found a comfortable place in Pragmatics when the traditional perspective was replaced by a new one, in which politeness was seen as a set of conversational strategies that a speaker can use to avoid a conflict with his/her partner, "to reduce friction in personal interaction" (Lakoff, 1975:6), or "to make possible communication between potentially aggressive parties" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:1). This view, which I will refer to as the *strategic approach*, is no longer interested in the social aspects of politeness, but stresses its individual, creative side. A change has taken place from a "formalistic" to a "functional" perspective (Held, 1992, Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 1992, and Werkhofner, 1992).

The basic assumptions in this approach (Searle, 1969, Searle, 1975, Lakoff, 1973, Brown & Levinson, 1987, Leech, 1983), can be summarized as follows: 1) polite is indirect; and 2) indirect is implicit. The relationship between politeness and indirectness is considered from two different points of view. On one hand, it suggests that the reason for being indirect is to be polite: if rational conversational principles, such as Grice's, are abandoned it is for the sake of politeness. On the other hand, it implies that the best way to be polite is to be indirect: remember that Brown & Levinson's (1987) most indirect strategy (*off-record strategy*) is the one to be used when the need for politeness is extreme. As for the nature of indirectness, it is assumed that the content of an indirect speech act crucially depends on an implicature, and is obtained by inference.

Given these assumptions, two major consequences can be drawn: first, that the relationship between indirectness and politeness is one of iconicity: the longer the inferential path, the higher the degree of politeness; second, that politeness mechanisms, since they are based on rational principles and on universal inference processes, must be themselves universal:

We have argued in this section that indirect speech acts have as their prime *raison d'être* the politeness functions they perform. (...) And finally we took pains to establish that indirect speech acts are universal and for the most part are probably constructed in essentially similar ways in all languages. We may suggest, then, that the universality of indirect speech acts follows from the basic service they perform with respect to universal strategies of politeness. (Brown & Levinson, 1987:142)

On these ideas a highly articulated framework has been built which has played an important role in the development of politeness studies, and has made very important contributions to the understanding of politeness phenomena. However, in the last ten or fifteen years, a growing stream of criticism has pointed out that there is a large amount of variation across cultures regarding not only the forms and their meanings, but also the strategies used by speakers in verbal interaction (Held, 1992, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992, or Janney & Arndt, 1993), and that the claim of universality was an illusion due to Anglo-centrally biased research.

Social Politeness and Cultural Variation

Cultural differences in the use of linguistic forms — Leech (1983) would call them pragmalinguistic variations — are, in fact, very easy to find. Slavic languages, as Polish or Russian, for instance, present severe restrictions on the use of interrogatives with an intended illocutionary force different from that of a question. According to Wierzbicka (1991), in those languages a formula like *Can you pass the salt?* would be understood as a genuine question, and not as a polite request, as it would in English or Spanish. Poles or Russians find it strange, because they assume that it is evident that they *can* pass the salt, and hence are unable to work out what the intended meaning could be. For other cultures, the same example would receive a more straightforward, but again wrong, interpretation. For example, if you use it while speaking to a Thai partner, you would obtain the opposite effect: s/he will immediately understand that you are overtly casting some doubts on her/his ability to do something, and will become very angry, as reported in Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1994).

These striking differences, which affect both the conditions of use of a formula and the interpretation associated with it, clearly indicate that posing a question about a precondition for an action is *not* a universal means of requesting. No doubt, this is an important descriptive point; but its theoretical consequences are even more important: if the interpretation of indirect illocutions is based on general, universal inference mechanisms, as claimed, then this would be a rather unexpected result. The degree of variation shown by different cultures poses, therefore, a strong challenge to the universality hypothesis.

Cultural variation also affects the internal structure of what could be perceived as the same speech act. For example, in most of our Western cultures, the act of thanking typically requires the explicit expression of gratitude — something like *Thank you very much*. In some Eastern cultures, however, it is necessary to express also an apology — something like *I'm sorry* (see Chao-chih, 1994 for specific details); by doing so, it is argued, the speaker tries to offer a

compensation to the hearer for the cost of the action done. The act of thanking has usually only one constituent in Western cultures, but two in several Eastern societies. The need for the apology is actually the consequence of a deeper difference concerning the conceptualization of the act of thanking itself. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1994), for some cultures only real altruistic actions deserve gratitude; it means that any action done as a normal part of a job (waiter, librarian, etc.) will not receive — and will not be expected to receive — any verbal acknowledgement. So, there are differences both in the internal structure of what seems to be the same speech act, and in the conditions governing its accomplishment. The variation in such aspects has been referred to as sociopragmatic variation.

Even general principles of conversational logic are, in a sense, culture-specific. For example, as is well-known (Ochs, 1976), in Madagascar people do not seem to follow Grice's maxims of quantity and quality, and are systematically less informative than required, or even give false information. The reason for this behaviour is to be found in a higher order principle: no information about the community can be freely given to a stranger... In traditional Malagasy society the need for saving collective face has a clear priority over Grice's maxims.

The Problems with Speech-Act-Based Approaches

All these facts seem to provide evidence against the idea that politeness mechanisms are universal, and therefore against the strategic approach: variation involves linguistic forms, social meanings, interactional strategies, expectations about verbal and non-verbal behaviour, ... etc. If conversational interaction is governed by culture-specific principles, then the possibility of building a general theory of politeness seems to be very limited. However, to give up all attempts at establishing general principles is never a desirable option from a theoretical point of view, so before giving up, it would be worth restating the problem and trying to find a better solution.

The proposal I want to explore is based on the idea that the contradiction between universality and culture-specificity is neither a necessary one, nor an unavoidable consequence of the analysis of facts, but a result of the choice of a particular framework. In other words, for a general theory of politeness to be possible, a change of perspective is needed.

From a theoretical perspective, both the strategic and the social approaches derive in some way from speech act theory, and both develop a model in which some version of the notion of *indirect speech act* plays a crucial role. The strategic approach assumed that the mechanisms and interpretation of speech acts were identical for all languages; the social approach could easily show that this was not the case. However, the key notion of *speech act* was not contested.

Also the concept of *indirectness* raises some problems. If it is not always possible to predict the right interpretation of any indirect speech act by inference, then the notion of indirectness does not seem very useful, since it does not cover a homogeneous set of phenomena. In fact, this difficulty had led some authors (Sadock, 1974, Morgan, 1978, or Bach & Harnish, 1979, among others; see the papers in Tsohatzidis, 1994, for a recent discussion) to establish a further distinction

between *conventional* and *non-conventional* indirect speech acts, which has been extensively used in the literature on politeness, in order to explain that the interpretation of a great number of indirect speech acts does not come from an implicature, but from the knowledge of a particular convention. If so, the existence of culture-specific indirect forms is the expected consequence, and the strategic approach loses one of its fundamental bases.

If indirect speech acts are not, after all, so “indirect”, indirectness can no longer be the main mechanism of politeness; in other words, the degree of politeness is not necessarily related to the degree of indirectness, i. e., to the inferential distance (see Blum-Kulka, 1987). In fact, as the investigations carried out by Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) have shown, the use of conventional formulae (both direct and indirect) reaches 90% in all the languages studied, even in those situations in which the need for a polite behaviour is very high.

In fact, it is easy to see that highly indirect strategies, such as hints, are not intrinsically polite. It is true that an utterance like *It is cold in here, isn't it?* can induce the hearer to turn the heating on, without the speaker being responsible for having asked; but it is clear as well that this is not a polite form of requesting — at least not in Spanish. I would never dare to use it in a formal situation, but only in a very familiar one, probably because it could be understood more as an overt criticism than as a polite request.

As for universality, perhaps it was not sought in the right way. The claim that a basic inventory of speech acts and politeness strategies was shared by all languages was a natural consequence of the idea that both verbal interaction and politeness principles were founded on strictly rational principles; but as soon as the existence of a considerable amount of intercultural variation can be proved, the main argument for the universality hypothesis crumbles: after all, if languages show such a degree of variation in other crucial aspects, why should politeness be an exception?

The studies carried out from a contrastive perspective can provide a fine-grained picture of the strategies governing interaction in different societies, or of each culture's particular *ethos*, and their results are very useful, for example, to explain intercultural miscommunication. However, if we want both to discover underlying principles and to account for variation, perhaps a different theory is needed that will permit more abstract generalizations. What I want to do here is to explore to what extent cognitive pragmatics provides an adequate framework for a general theory of politeness.

THE STRUCTURE OF KNOWLEDGE

General Knowledge and Specific Knowledge.

The proposal I want to make is built on basic assumptions of cognitive theories (Johnson-Laird, 1983 and 1989, Gentner & Stevens, 1983, Posner, 1989, Stevenson, 1993). First, the idea that the mind is a symbolic system: as human beings, we need to map all our perceptions of the

persons, objects and events in the real world on to internal representations; our knowledge can be seen, thus, as a set of assumptions. Second, the idea that human knowledge is highly structured: our internal representations do not merely form a list, but a complex network of sets of organized items. Third, the idea that perception, behaviour and understanding depend crucially on previous knowledge. These are common assumptions in cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence, and have proved relevant also for explaining natural language processing by humans.

According to Schank & Abelson (1977: 37) there are

two classes of knowledge that people bring to bear during the understanding process: general knowledge and specific knowledge. General knowledge enables a person to understand and interpret another person's actions simply because the other person is a human being with certain standard needs.

Specific knowledge, on the other hand, permits us

to interpret and participate in events we have been through many times. Specific detailed knowledge about a situation allows us to do less processing and wondering about frequently experienced events.

Different authors in the area of artificial intelligence have proposed different labels to identify the basic notion of ‘set of structured specific knowledge’. For example, Hymes (1974) and Minsky (1975, 1986) have used the term *frame* (although each with a different content), Rumelhart (1976) spoke of *schema*, Schank & Abelson (1977) preferred *script*, and Sanford & Garrod (1981) used *scenario*. For Minsky a frame is a data structure for representing a stereotyped situation. It denotes event sequences, but also ordered expectations of objects and settings. In Schank & Abelson's theory a script is

a structure that describes appropriate sequences of events in particular contexts. A script is made of slots and requirements about what can fill those slots, (...) is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation. (...) Every script has associated with it a number of roles. (Schank & Abelson, 1977:41)

There are, of course, differences between them, but it seems that similarities are more significant. As Tannen (1993: 15) puts it, “frames, scripts, schemas... etc are based on *structures of expectations*”, i.e. on the idea that one organizes knowledge on the basis of one's experience of the world, and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events and experiences. For the sake of simplicity, in what follows I will ignore the differences between these terms, and will use them as synonymous, always referring to structured sets of organized knowledge.

Frames and Language Use

Our understanding of discourse comprehension (including the explanation of syntactic phenomena such as, for instance, the use of definite articles) has clearly benefited from this approach (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, Grosz, Pollack & Sidner, 1989). The semantic content of our utterances and discourses is usually abstract, vague, underdetermined, ambiguous, inaccurate, and sometimes overtly false. However, we (try to) understand each other by filling the gaps and bridging the missing steps, i.e., by an inference process. The important thing is that we do this in a rather automatic way.

To explain such a highly effective performance, it has been claimed from the cognitive perspective that understanding processes involve matching the representations transmitted by the utterance (external data) to some organized set of representations stored in our minds (internal information). Only if we assume that we can recall an appropriate model predetermining the arrangement and the connections existing between new pieces of information to some extent, will we be able to account for real-time processing. Each organized set of representations provides a ready-made pattern of interpretation, which contains slots to be filled by new input data, and which assigns them different roles and functions: this system works automatically, unless the expectations are not fulfilled; in this case, the system stops and inferential processes are brought into consciousness. As hearers, we suppose we have reached an interpretation when we find a model that completes the new information with existing assumptions. As speakers, we know that we can count on the hearer's knowledge to dispense with unnecessary information (i.e. information that can be easily inferred). Thus, both producing and understanding language are based on structured knowledge.

The main concepts in an utterance activate their corresponding frames, and set the cognitive foundations needed for subsequent concepts to appear. Not only a word, but also an extralinguistic situation can serve as a trigger. For example, whenever we enter a restaurant we retrieve its corresponding frame. Thus, all the information related to prototypical participants, activities and circumstances in this particular frame is brought into focus, and can be effortlessly activated when necessary. In this way, linguistic data are automatically interpreted in terms of a particular set of representations.

For any cognitive model of discourse processing, some notion of *frame* is absolutely necessary; and it is even more so if we want to account for those cases in which the words themselves do not give enough information to find a context of interpretation. For example, we could not interpret a simple utterance like *Two, please* unless we knew the situation in which it was uttered: we obtain different interpretations depending on whether it was used at the theatre, or at the restaurant, and so on. Of course, it does not mean that the notion of *frame* is a "last resort" notion we have to appeal to only when other things fail. Mental models are the way humans organize knowledge and experience, and are therefore retrieved in all cases.

In addition, specific knowledge provides us not only with a pattern for understanding, but also with a pattern for behaviour. Since our mental representation of a particular situation should contain not only information on participants and activities, but also on the appropriate use of language, we find that much of our (linguistic) behaviour is, therefore, determined by specific

knowledge. Again, this is not an unexpected result, if we assume that the use of language is mostly systematic and hence must have some sort of knowledge behind it.

Specific Knowledge and Cultural Variation

Specific knowledge is *specific* because there are different situations with different actions, participants and properties, but also because there are different cultures. Since the situations that cristalize in specific knowledge show a high degree of variation from culture to culture, we can easily predict that sets of representations will be, to a large extent, culture-specific. In fact, many authors have pointed out that members of different cultures have developed different systems of specific knowledge. As Janney & Arndt (1992:30) put it,

growing up to become a normal member of a culture is largely a matter of learning how to perceive, think, and behave as others in the culture do.

And Jackendoff (1992: 74) says:

Each individual's participation in the culture must be supported by cognitive organization in the individual's mind. (...) The way individuals are capable of acting out within a society depends on the way they are capable of internally representing the social context.

Culturally determined (sub)sets of assumptions govern the interaction in a permanent and automatic way, as other assumptions do. However, there is a fundamental difference: the strength of cultural assumptions is such that they cannot be easily modified by other assumptions that contradict them. Janney & Arndt (1992:31) say

Once such assumptions are formed, they remain relatively stable and their influence on social interaction becomes almost automatic. Events that contradict them do not change them but tend rather to be interpreted as incorrect, ununderstandable, or abnormal.

For example, as a member of my own culture I have learned that there is a particular set of situations in which one has to express gratitude; any behaviour which deviates from this norm will not modify my assumptions, but rather will be perceived as strange or impolite. As Kasper (1992) notes, it explains also that first-language-specific style of interaction is maintained through the third and fourth generation immigrants, despite the fact that they no longer speak the language of their ancestors.

Cultural assumptions are thus different from ordinary factual assumptions, which are entertained with more or less confidence depending on the way the assumption has been acquired, but which can be removed or modified when enough evidence is found against them. For example, we usually take for granted that President Kennedy was Marilyn Monroe's lover; however, I would be prepared to change my mind if someone presented compelling evidence against this, and proved that the whole story was a set-up.

Therefore cultural assumptions seem to be stored in some kind of ROM, of “read-only memory”: they can be retrieved and used, but they cannot be written over — at most, one can consciously open a new parallel file with new data from a new culture, but it will not replace the original existing file. The specificity and the strength of cultural assumptions is to be related to emotions, as Wierzbicka (1991), Janney & Arndt (1992), or Caffi & Janney (1994) have argued. In fact, it seems that there is even neurophysiological support for this claim: it has been recently proved (Adolphs *et al.*, 1994) that the amygdala (an almond-shaped configuration in the brain) controls both emotions and a part of social behaviour.

POLITENESS IN RELEVANCE THEORY

The Framework of Relevance Theory

The adoption of the framework suggested in Sperber & Wilson's (1986) *Relevance* leads to a necessary restating of the problem posed by politeness phenomena, since some key notions in former approaches, such as *speech act* or *indirectness*, are no longer relevance-theoretic terms. To begin with, in Relevance Theory (henceforth, RT) there is no claim about a constant correlation between sentence types and illocutionary act types. Linguistic forms do not directly encode illocutionary forces, but merely serve as a guide for interpretation, i.e., as a constraint on relevance: they “make manifest the direction in which relevance is to be sought” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:254). In other words, what sentence types encode is procedural information that restricts the range of possible interpretations. Thus, the particular force of a particular utterance always depends both on the linguistic form and the context.

The notion of *context* is, in fact, a central one in RT: it is the set of assumptions that a hearer uses in the interpretation of a particular utterance. The hearer, guided by the presumption of relevance, selects the context that will yield an optimally relevant interpretation: the context is not given, but chosen by the hearer.

On the other hand, there is a crucial difference between *implicature* and *explicature*. Implicatures are the assumptions that the speaker tries to make manifest to the hearer without expressing them; implicatures are recovered by inference. Explicatures are the assumptions that the speaker explicitly communicates, i.e., the assumptions that can be directly developed from the logical form of the utterance. As is well known, the distinction between implicatures and explicatures does not parallel the distinction between inference and decoding, since the determination of the explicatures of an utterance (i.e., the recovering of its complete propositional form) also needs inference, as well as decoding. If so, there is no room either for the distinction between direct and indirect speech acts.

According to this model, both the production and the interpretation of any utterance is subject to the *principle of relevance*, which reads as follows:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:158)

This principle develops from a descriptive generalization about the way humans process information: whenever we interpret a sample of intentional communication, we automatically assume that it is important enough for its processing to be worth our while. Intentional communication, then, is supposed to guarantee an optimal balance between costs (processing effort) and benefits (contextual effects): the greater the processing effort, the greater the expected contextual effects. Thus, inferential distance is not directly linked to politeness, but to relevance: the greater the inferential distance, the greater the processing effort, and consequently, the greater the expected effects.

Let's remember how the model works with a standard example. In the interpretation of a dialogue like

A [holding a box of chocolates]: —Would you like a chocolate?
B [sadly]: —I'm on a diet.

for the intended meaning of the answer (that B does not want a chocolate) to be obtained it is necessary, for example, that A be able to access a proposition like *Chocolates are fattening* in the encyclopaedic entry for *chocolate*, and also something like *Diets are to lose weight* in the entry for *diet*. The right interpretation cannot be reached unless these two pieces of knowledge are available to A; moreover, as the dialogue shows, both assumptions are also available to B. Notice that if A were a member of a culture in which there were no chocolates, or these were not fattening (i.e., if A could neither access nor construct the relevant piece of information), s/he could never adequately recover B's intended meaning.

Relevance and Social Aspects of Communication

What I want to do here is to explore to what extent RT can provide an adequate framework for a general theory of politeness. At first sight, this idea may sound rather strange, given that usual criticisms to RT point out that it ignores the social dimension of communication. For example, Mey & Talbot (1988: 243) say:

Intentionalist models of human agency are looking at only half the picture of language. A theory of social action, whether for language or any other form of behaviour, needs an account of both creative and conventional elements. (...) In an intentionalist model such as SW's an actor is a spontaneous individual consciously working on unique problems, rather than a social agent working on pre-existing conventions with resources available to him/her which s/he cannot be aware of. (...) SW disregard the perspective on the language use from which such use perpetuates historically constituted ways of saying and doing, a perspective from which types of interaction are predetermined.

In the same spirit, O'Neill (1988-89:243) points out that a purely propositional, cognitivist view of communication cannot account for "the social constraints on language use that come under the misleading label of 'politeness' ", since

it is unable to deal with conversation in which participants speak relevantly but do not intend to convey new information, or increase or decrease the strength of a hearer's beliefs. Central examples here would be exchanges with purposes such as (1) the maintenance of social relations, (2) the strengthening of social relations, (3) the exercise of power, (4) the use of language for cathartic purposes, and so on. (O'Neill, 1988-89:247)

It is true that relevance theorists have in fact paid little attention to social aspects of communication. While recognising the interest of such a study, they see themselves in a very different position:

There is no conflict between Leech's socio-pragmatics approach and the present psychological approach, because they are attempting to do different things. For this reason it is misleading to include phenomena like politeness, face-saving and turn-taking together with the phenomena discussed in the following chapters under the general heading of pragmatics. (Blakemore, 1992:47)

One could argue that, being a theory of utterance interpretation, RT is not concerned with predicting when behaviour will be appropriate to the situation (although other cognitive pragmatic theories are; see Kasher, 1991, and Sinclair, 1995 for comments), but only with explaining information processing: in this sense, providing an account for the differences between cultures is not a relevance-theoretic objective either. What RT definitively has to explain is when politeness is relevant to the interpretation: When does it constitute a message? When and how do "(im)politeness effects" arise?

However, recent developments of RT seem to favour a rapprochement between these two perspectives. At the end of the postface to the second edition of *Relevance*, Sperber & Wilson (1995) write:

Two important and related domains have been explored hardly at all from a relevance-theoretic perspective (...) The cognitive processes at work in the communicator, and the social character and context of communication are, of course, essential to the wider picture, to the study of which we hope relevance theory can contribute, and from which it stands greatly to benefit.

In addition, there is no necessary contradiction between a cognitive model and a general theory of politeness; moreover, to my mind, only in a cognitive model can a sufficient degree of generalization be reached to build such a theory. That is what I want to show in the following sections.

A Knowledge-Based Approach to Politeness

There have been several attempts (Jucker, 1988, Clark, 1994, Groefsema, 1995) to include some of the facts that are usually referred to as *politeness phenomena* in a RT framework. The main point in these works has been that of showing how so-called politeness phenomena are not different from "standard" examples, and that their interpretation follows the usual inferential steps. The idea is elegant and appealing and, as I will try to argue later, basically right. However, as it is stated, this view has to face the same problems as strategic approaches: given cultural differences, a particular inferential pattern can serve to explain the interpretation of an utterance in one culture, but not in others.

My proposal is that social aspects of communication have to be explained in terms, not of inferential patterns working on universal principles, but of the structure and contents of specific knowledge: the emphasis is to be put especially on context, and not on inferential devices.

The notion of context, which plays a crucial role in utterance interpretation, is clearly related to knowledge, given that it is a particular subset of the whole set of assumptions held by an individual in a particular moment. The advantage of using an internal (cognitive) notion of context is that it permits us to give a unified analysis of both external factors and internal assumptions. In our minds, previous utterances, extralinguistic situation and encyclopaedic knowledge have all the same status: they are all internal representations. This opens the possibility for a cognitive pragmatics of social action: social and situational aspects of communication are interesting to cognitive pragmatics because they are mapped on to mental representations.

If so, some concept of *frame* (as a specific structured set of assumptions) becomes a key-notion in any attempt to suggest a cognitive approach to social phenomena in general, and to politeness in particular, since it permits us to explain them in terms of culturally determined, organized sets of assumptions. But how does the notion of *frame* fit into RT?

To begin with, the notion of *frame* is not foreign to RT. The encyclopaedic entry associated with a concept is usually seen as consisting of an organized set of related propositions (Sperber & Wilson, 1986:87-88). The role of these assumptions in the interpretation is crucial. Wilson (1993), for example, uses the notion of *scenario* to explain how disambiguation procedures work. In her example, two people are writing a TV thriller; one of them says:

When the police come in, the criminal makes a bolt for the door.

Out of context, the main clause is ambiguous between two interpretations: 'running for the door' and 'constructing a door-bolt'; however, in the situation described only the first one seems natural. How does RT account for this selection? Wilson's explanation goes as follows:

In the circumstances, the first interpretation to occur to the hearer should be ['running for the door']; moreover, this interpretation will be consistent with the principle of relevance: i.e. it will yield adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort in a way the speaker

could manifestly have foreseen. Why should it be the first interpretation to occur to the hearer? Because *it is based on a very stereotypical scenario*. We have all *frequently* seen thrillers in which such a scene occurs; *we should thus have easy access to a ready-made context in which to process the utterance* on this interpretation: the police come in, the criminal runs to the door to escape the police, the police give chase, and so on. (Wilson, 1993:355) [*Italics* are mine, V.E.V.]

So, in order to properly understand the utterance, we need to have some particular *knowledge*, previously obtained *via a frequent exposure* to the situation. The contribution of this particular knowledge to the interpretation is that of making more *accessible* some related set of assumptions, which provides us with a *ready-made context*. This is exactly what a *frame* does. Frames are, therefore, not to be seen as rigid, inflexible structures, but just as sets of organized knowledge made easily accessible.

The fact that a particular frame is activated does not mean that this frame *is* the context: the frame only makes a preselection of a *structured* set of assumptions from which the specific context can be chosen; so we can maintain the idea that the context is the particular subset of representations used in the interpretation of a particular utterance.

In the following sections I will try to outline how this perspective enables us to account for “politeness effects” arisen from the (non-)fulfilment of expectations (a matter of some interest to RT), to explain adequate “polite” behaviour (a matter of some interest to other cognitive pragmatic theories, such as Kasher’s), and to capture the differences in the styles of interaction of different cultures in cognitive terms (a matter of some interest to second language teaching/acquisition and to studies on intercultural (mis)communication).

Some Examples

The same mechanism as we use to account for the interpretation of “standard” examples (such as the ones about chocolates and diets, or about making a bolt for the door) can be extended to the explanation of classical phenomena in politeness studies. We do not need any special processing machinery; we only need some culturally determined sets of assumptions.

Let’s begin with a simple case. As we have seen before, an utterance like *Can you pass the salt?* can yield very different interpretations (the English/Spanish interpretation, but also the Thai one, and the Russian/Polish one). We cannot derive all three interpretations by only using “rational”, “universal” premises. We will never be able to explain them unless we suppose that members of each one of these cultures have internalized different sets of assumptions regarding linguistic and interactional routines. One possibility is, in fact, to suppose that the difference is lexical: the meaning of *can* has different properties in different languages, and hence semantics itself constrains the interpretation in different ways for each language (Groefsema, 1995). Another possibility is to suppose that the differences are cultural, and are a result of some conversational convention: the formula is conventionally used as a means to make a request in English or Spa-

nish, but not necessarily in other languages. This second view (the one I would choose) is especially useful for second language teaching, and seems to be empirically supported by data regarding the nature of learning (Schmidt, 1993). There is not, however, a radical difference between these two solutions, since both share a clear common feature: there must be some piece of knowledge (be it at the lexical or at the cultural level) that governs the interpretation. Thus the explanation always relies on specific knowledge.

We can also explain the use of “non-informative” polite utterances along the same lines. Let’s examine one of the critical examples in this light. Suppose you have just had your hair cut and you look completely different. When you next meet one of your friends, s/he utters something like

Oh! You’ve had your hair cut!

Some authors have claimed that it is impossible to account for such utterances from a relevance-theoretic point of view, given that their content does not interact with one’s previous assumptions: you *already know* that you have had your hair cut. This is, however, a fallacy. The utterance *does* interact with the hearer’s previous assumptions. True, it *does not*, of course, do so with your factual assumptions regarding states-of-affairs; but it *does* with your cultural assumptions regarding social relationships. To see in what sense it is important, consider what would have happened if your friend had not said anything: you would have probably begun to wonder why. It means that we take for granted that in such a situation a friend will make some comment.

Interpersonal relationships (like *friend, father, lover, colleague, boss, enemy...*) also have a set of specific knowledge associated with them — Schank and Abelson (1977:138) would call it a *theme* — , which leads to a number of expectations, of “predictions about how one person will act towards another in various situations.” Our frame for friends or acquaintances enables you to suppose (i.e., to predict) that your friend will say something to you. If s/he does not, given that it is overtly manifest that you have changed your looks, there must be a sufficient reason for her/him to depart from the expectations, and you would probably guess that s/he does not like your new hair-style (and, interestingly enough, without further evidence you will never know whether your guess was on the right track or not). Notice also that this is not an automatic inference, but a conscious one — exactly the kind of result we would expect when a “framed” requirement is not met, and the interpretation must be made in the general knowledge devices.

There is still another aspect of politeness that can profit from adopting a cognitive perspective: it is the view on the relationship between linguistic form and politeness. It has been claimed that there are no inherently polite forms, the polite effect being always a result of computing both the linguistic form and the situation. However, as Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992) has pointed out, it is clear that, at least in our culture, an utterance like *After you* would always sound more polite than *Me first*, even out of a particular situation.

An explanation can be easily found in a cognitive framework such as Sperber and Wilson’s. Context is again the key-notion. In other approaches context is seen as something external and given; in RT — as in other cognitive approaches — it is internal and selected (chosen) at the

time of interpretation. Kleiber (1994) has argued that generic sentences are interpreted out of a situation by selecting a default context of stereotypical knowledge. An explanation along the same lines can be suggested in the case of politeness: it is precisely the internal, cognitive nature of context, of knowledge, which enables us to evaluate something as polite or not without a real situation, so we can assign a “politeness default value” to an utterance according to our stored assumptions about principles governing interpersonal relations: if we have learned that *allowing the hearer to go first* is a “polite” belief in our culture, then *After you* would be polite by default.

One could argue that a polite utterance can be overtly impolite in some given circumstances: think, for example, of an expression like *Would you please be quiet?* when mildly uttered by a very angry person to her/his partner. However, I believe that these cases do not constitute a counterexample to the suggested analysis since they are not genuine examples of use, but of mention (See Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 4.9, and Wilson & Sperber, 1992, for details). To interpret them adequately it is absolutely necessary that our knowledge of the situation should make manifest the *overt* mismatch between it and what the speaker is saying. The existence of these uses is even a good argument for our explanation: in fact if we can recognize the use as an ironic or sarcastic one it is precisely because we know that its default value is polite and we can easily see the existing contradiction.

If specific knowledge is also culture-specific, then different cultures will have different sets of organized knowledge regarding social relationships, events and situations. If so, a natural explanation for the failures in intercultural communication is found, which can be seen as the consequence of two people trying to act out the same “scene” with different internalized “scripts” — metaphorically speaking. In fact, this is also the reason for a considerable amount of intracultural misunderstanding. There is, however, an important difference between these two types of miscommunication. Intracultural misunderstanding is, usually, the result of a wrong selection of the script: one of the partners misinterprets a key concept or the whole situation and selects the wrong “script”, and as a result they are “acting out different scenes”. In intercultural miscommunication, on the other hand, even if both partners have usually selected the right script and are trying to act out the same scene, their scripts do not happen to contain the same “text” — so to speak. Since the partners assume they have reached a basic agreement regarding what kind of scene they are acting out, and since most of the scripts correspond to well-known situations, which they have all successfully overcome thousands of times, the hypothesis that the partner is following a somewhat different script does not seem very likely, and the unexpected behaviour is interpreted as fully intentional: every time that one of the participants does not act as expected, his/her partner’s processing systems automatically assume that there must be some explanation for it — most of the time, a negative one. Of course, I do not mean that the wrong selection of the script *cannot* be also a source of misunderstanding in intercultural communication; or that the right selection of scripts, but of different ones, is *not* a possibility for speakers from the same culture: what I am claiming is that typical misunderstandings have a different origin in both cases. In this way, we can account for intercultural miscommunication in a very simple manner.

Is Politeness Relevant?

In the cases we have just examined, the role played by previous knowledge is crucial, but in what sense might we say that the utterances are relevant?

In the case of the “conventional indirect” formula *Can you pass the salt?*, the interpretation as a request is automatic in English and Spanish as a consequence of the existence of a particular convention: in other words, we know we can rely on the convention to ensure the transmission of the intended force. If the interpretation of this formula was a result of a long inferential path, we would expect to be rewarded by special cognitive effects; however, this is not the case. In fact, having a straightforward, conventional interpretation, no special effort is needed to process it, and no special contextual effects are obtained. The consequence is that the very form of the expression goes “unnoticed”, and is irrelevant in the technical sense. As Mark Jary has suggested (p.c.; see also Jary, 1995 for a convincing discussion on this subject), linguistic forms used to perform illocutionary acts only achieve relevance themselves if they differ from what was expected.

A similar proposal can be made for the second case (*Oh! You’ve had your hair cut!*): it is true that the content of the utterance is almost irrelevant in its representational side; it has some (though not very strong) cognitive effects when combined with our social expectations about the interaction with friends, since it fulfils our cultural assumptions on their expected behaviour, and it serves thus to confirm or strengthen previous assumptions; but, again, if our expectations are not satisfied (i.e., if there is no reaction to the new hair-style), an “impoliteness effect” immediately arises. “Politeness” is thus necessary in order to avoid triggering unwanted implications of impoliteness.

In this way, this analysis clearly supports a characterization of politeness *à la Fraser*:

Politeness is a state that one expects to exist in every conversation; participants note not that someone is being polite — this is the norm —, but rather that the speaker is violating the C[onversational] C[ontract]. Being polite does not involve making the hearer to ‘feel good’ à la Lakoff or Leech, nor making the hearer not ‘feel bad’ à la B[rown] & L[evinson]. It simply involves getting on with the task at hand in light of the terms and conditions of the CC. The intention to be polite is not signaled, it is not implicated by some deviation(s) from the most ‘efficient’ bald-on record way of using the language. (Fraser, 1990:233)

CONCLUSION

In the previous sections I have tried to sketch a picture of politeness phenomena from the perspective of cognitive theories. As I suggested before, there does not seem to be any

necessary contradiction between a cognitive approach and a theory of politeness; moreover, with such an approach, I think, several advantages are obtained.

On the one hand, I have tried to show that cultural differences concerning the style of interaction can be easily accommodated in a cognitive framework in terms of differences in the contents and the structure of specific knowledge. Our social behaviour (including language use) is not a matter of chaotic, unruly performance, but crucially reflects some kind of systematic knowledge behind it. To behave politely is not a natural quality — anyone who has a child knows this —, but an acquired ability (Blum-Kulka, 1990, Snow *et al.*, 1990, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992, Kwarciak, 1993, Bialystok, 1993, or Schmidt, 1993). We must give children constant explicit instruction on the use of elementary polite formulae, such as *Say “hello”, Say “thank you”, Say “please”,* and so on. They first become aware of the differences regarding social status of others, and only later do they acquire tactful behaviour: children are not able to evaluate the degree of imposition of a particular illocution, or to be modest, or to tell white lies, until they are approximately ten. The fact that we need to acquire it as part of the socialization process, and the fact that we feel lost when faced with a different social and cultural system strongly suggests that it is indeed a matter of knowledge.

On the other hand, in a cognitive framework the interpretation of politeness phenomena fits in a natural way, since it uses the same mechanisms and follows the same inferential steps as the interpretation of any other kind of utterance, and consequently no special processing devices are needed to account for it. In this sense, the suggested approach is consistent with standard requirements on theoretical simplicity, and does not add any *ad hoc* mechanism: the existence of both a set of representations and a system for manipulating them (together with a complex perceptual system) is motivated on independent grounds. In addition, the adoption of this framework enables us to dispense with some problematic notions such as *indirectness*, which are not clearly defined and therefore do not seem very useful.

However, there are still two questions that remain unanswered. The first one can be posed as follows: if we claim that social interaction does not use a specific processing system, do we really need a particular theory of politeness? The second one regards universality: I have tried to show the way in which cultural variation can be explained from a cognitive perspective; however this was not my initial point: what about universal principles? Is it still possible or even necessary to establish them? To my mind, both questions have a related answer.

If we consider pragmatics from a cognitive perspective, one of its tasks will be that of describing and explaining the structure and properties of the knowledge that underlies language use (Kasher, 1994). Politeness exploits general processing devices, but also particular pieces of knowledge. Therefore, we will have to explain what the nature is of that knowledge. Jackendoff (1992) has convincingly argued that social cognition can be considered as a separate faculty within the level of conceptual structure. Its main task would be that of developing a coherent picture of the self in society. Its specificity comes, among other things, from the fact that the formation of social concepts does not follow the same steps as ordinary object perception and categorization, since it has to invoke elements and establish relationships with no direct perceptual motivation. Along

similar lines, Sperber (1994) has recently suggested that cultural diversity is not incompatible with modularity: on the contrary, “organisms endowed with truly modular minds might engender truly diverse cultures” (Sperber, 1994:40), and “many basic conceptual thought processes (...) are governed by domain-specific competences” (Sperber, 1994:42).

If we accept this view, the theory of politeness will therefore be a theory of the faculty of social cognition, and will have to account for the structure and properties of the knowledge that governs interaction. Notice that this task cannot be a purely descriptive one: if we want the theory to have a real explanatory power, we will have to restrict the range of these assumptions, to establish their relative strength, to identify the crucial factors and to discover the principles behind them.

At the same time, this is also the way to find universals. In grammatical theory we try to restrict the set of possible natural grammars by assuming that differences between languages can be explained as the result of the interaction of few, very general conditions which can take different values: universals have the form of abstract principles (in the current sense used in generative grammar, not in the standard pragmatic sense) subject to parametric variation. It seems reasonable to depart from the same hypothesis also for pragmatic universals. Suitable candidates will have no longer the form of kinds of indirect strategies, but rather of principles with two or more possible values. In this sense, it seems that the generalizations suggested by early approaches to politeness, such as Leech’s (1983) or Brown & Levinson’s (1987), were somehow on the right track, and only need to be relativized; what changes from culture to culture is the particular value selected for each one of these principles and their relative positions. The conception of interpersonal relations (i.e., of *distance* and *power*), and the notion of *face* (with its *positive* and *negative* sides) are constitutive parts of any politeness system; again, the differences between cultures depend on different selections for their values. We will have to allow also some degree of internal variation in order to explain really strategic and creative politeness.

The search for universals can be seen, therefore, as an attempt to restrict the set of possible politeness systems, i.e. the contents of the networks of specific knowledge which govern human interaction. If so, we do need a general theory of politeness as a particular subsystem in a cognitive pragmatic theory. At the moment we can only offer partial solutions; but this is, I think, an interesting path to be followed by future investigations.

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