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MANAGING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

At the core of the new approaches to verbal interaction lies the idea of intersubjectivity placing a great emphasis on the creation of social relations. Interaction implies not only following particular conventional principles or some discursive strategies, but also adopting certain social behaviours. In 1975 Grice mentioned in his article *Logic and Conversation* about the existence of *moral*, *aesthetic* and *social* rules which all fall into the principle of politeness: "Be polite!" Brown & Levinson (*Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*, 1987) developed a theory of politeness having as starting point Gofman's concept of the *face* (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1956). The interactants have to spare or to protect the positive and/or negative *faces* within the verbal communication, since the presence of FTA (Face Threatening Acts) leads to the application of certain strategies in order to avoid this threat. The *Facework* consists of a series of procedures at the interactants' disposal meant to save these *faces*. Interactants resort to different indirect forms of expressions that can help the process of conversation. Having in mind that the non-verbal aspects and the social context are essential in defining the *Facework*, we try in our paper to show that certain linguistic phenomena (such as Indirect Speech Acts, the apologies, the implicit, etc) are tightly connected with the management of interpersonal relationships

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1. Introduction

The co-development of the conversational text complies with a number of rules concerning the organisation and structuring of the interaction as well as with a series of rituals that highlight the *symbolic*



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and *affective* dimensions of the conversational exchange (Traverso, 2005, p. 50). Interpersonal relations are developed through interaction and it is interaction that constitutes the locus where individuals assert their social belonging.

For a long period of time, researchers such as H. P. Grice (1975), O. Ducrot (1984) or D. Mangueneau (1990; 1991) laid emphasis in their studies only on the observation of conversational principles or discursive rules. However, conversational linguistics has lately focused on the principles concerning social behaviour and conversational routines, so that we can state that “politeness is a phenomenon which is pertinent from a linguistic point of view” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, p, 50).

2. Problem Statement

The positioning of individuals towards one another during interactions defines the very nature of interpersonal relationships. By analysing such positioning, pragmaticists have identified several types of structure: symmetrical, complementary, and hierarchical relationships, respectively; structures undergoing constant dynamics, which can lead to more or less significant imbalances, and the *alter natura* of personal relationships. The place of an individual in an interaction depends on a triple determination: social (his institutional role), interactional (a position always defined by reference to the other interactional positions) and subjective (the representation that every subjects has of him/herself); however, it is under constant negotiation and interpretation, as the interactional exchange unfolds. In case of an asymmetric interaction, although the interlocutors take positions of superiority or inferiority, depending on their social status or on other subjective criteria, concerning their own interactional history, the asymmetric character can transform, so that the relationship will evolve towards complementarity or even symmetry. In order for such a transformation not to entail important disequilibria in the relationship, which could even cause interactional rupture, the actors have at disposal a whole set of norms, social rituals and politeness rules.

3. Research Questions

Starting from the idea that politeness is the fundamental balancing principle, especially in an asymmetrical relationship, the questions raises in the present study regard the way in which the politeness principle manifests itself at the linguistic level, which governs social relations and the measure in which the speech acts performed by the person that finds itself in a superior position are perceived as aggression and thus entail stigmatizing the behaviour of the person's in inferiority, as well as pathologies of the interactional exchange.

4. Purpose of the Study

Our paper is structured in two parts. In the first part, the paper presents some theoretical aspects concerning the definition of politeness as a linguistic phenomenon. The second section deals with the analysis of speech acts performed by Eugène Ionesco's characters from the play entitled *The Lesson*, showing that these speech acts render the alteration of interpersonal relationships. Caught in a space that offers no escape possibility, the Professor, the Pupil and the Maid undergo reverse metamorphoses. The transformations the characters go through also imprint their discourses, and so the breaking of discursive

laws and social behaviour patterns expresses very clearly the change of power relations between the characters.

5. Research Methods

Our analysis of Face Threatening Acts and Face Enhancing Acts in *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco is based on the instruments proposed by pragmatics, enunciation theory and interaction analysis and emphasises the idea advanced by C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni according to which *politeness is a pertinent phenomenon from a linguistic point of view*. Speech acts, particularly the apologizing act, are analysed according to the framework proposed by the interactional pragmatics and are envisaged not only as a manner of acting but as a manner of interacting.

6. Findings

6.1. Theoretical Framework

6.1.1. The Theory of Politeness Developed by P. Brown & S. Levinson

One of the most elaborate theoretical frameworks that approach the problematics of linguistic politeness is represented by the model developed by P. Brown & S. Levinson (1987). This theory is based on the concept of *face*, formerly introduced by Goffman in his study from 1967. The *face*, as defined by Goffman, corresponds to a social image valorization developed by the interlocutors and which they want to impose during the interaction, depending on the behavioural line adopted. Brown & Levinson (1987) introduce, besides the notion of face borrowed from Goffman, the notion of *territory* (which corresponds to the concept of “territories of the self” described by Goffman in *Relations in public* (1971), a concept that comprises eight types of spaces of the self: *personal space, the stall, use space, the turn, the sheath, possessional territory, information preserve and conversation preserve*). Therefore, according to Brown & Levinson (1987), every individual possesses two faces: a positive face, which corresponds to the concept of face defined by Goffman (“*the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants*”) and a negative face, which corresponds to the definition given by Goffman to the concept of “territories of the self” (“*the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition*”) (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61).

As a consequence, there are two accepted meanings of politeness: a positive politeness, which regards the positive face of the interlocutor, and a negative one that implies *self-effacement* on the part of the locutor and which is mainly directed toward the negative face of the interlocutor.

The territory (negative face) must be understood as personal space, but not only in a material sense, as corporal or temporal space, but also as a cognitive or affective dimension. During the interaction, the individuals express the desire to preserve their faces (*face-want*) and must act by means of a sustained effort to prevent the damaging of either face (*face-work*), including their own faces. Speech acts (as well as non-verbal ones) performed by the interactants can represent threats to their positive and/or negative faces. Brown & Levinson (1987) propose the term *Face Threatening Acts* in order to designate the acts by means of which these face potential threats are performed, any speech act

constituting a threat to at least one of the two faces present. Face threats are weakened by means of various politeness strategies, politeness being “a means of reconciling the mutual desire to preserve one’s faces with the fact that most speech acts are potentially threatening to either of the faces” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, p. 53). Brown & Levinson (1957) identify three sociological factors that are essential in choosing a certain politeness strategy: *the social distance (D)* between interactants, their power relations (*relative power, P*) and *the ranking of the imposition (R) involved in doing the FTA* (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 15). Depending on these social variables, the locutor opts for a strategy to elaborate his/her communicative contribution (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1972).

Although the theory they propose claims to be a universal one (Brown & Levinson analyse the functioning of totally different languages: English, Tamil, Tzeltal, Japanese, Malgash), there are situations that are culturally different and so the explanatory efficiency of this theory reveals its limits (197). One of the criticisms brought to the model proposed by the two researchers results especially from the fact that the expression of politeness depends on specific cultural contexts. However, we can state that “*despite these criticisms, politeness theory provides an excellent theoretical basis for continuing work on how individuals achieve sociability in face-to-face interaction*” (Jarowski & Coupland, 1999, p. 297). Cultural differences do not mar the universal nature of politeness principles, what differs in the case of each culture being the manner in which these “*universals in language use*” are applied: “*This framework puts into perspective the ways in which societies are not the same interactionally, and the innumerable possibilities for cross-cultural misunderstanding that arise*” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 258).

6.1.2. Catherine Kerbrat Orecchioni’s Revisions - to Brown & Levinson’s Model

G. Kasper formulates another critical idea concerning this theory, according to which individuals’ actions are influenced by continuous verbal threats, being constrained all the time to protect their faces: “*This theory represents an overly pessimistic, rather paranoid view of human social interaction*” (1990: 194). Regarded simply as an attempt of protecting one’s faces and appearance, politeness is reduced only to some superficial aspects, the manner in which Brown & Levinson’s model works being thus *caricaturized* (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1997, p. 152). Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1992, pp. 177-178) considers that the weak point of this theory rests on the fact that positive politeness and negative politeness are assimilated to the positive face and to the negative face. The French researcher proposes a radical revision of this opposition starting from Durkheim’s (1995) distinction between positive and negative rites. Negative politeness is *abstentionist or compensatory* and entails the avoidance of producing *Face Threatening Acts* or their *attenuation or softening* by means of various procedures, either through substitution as in the case of the indirect formulation of a speech act, or through *accompanying procedures*¹, whereas positive politeness *has a productionist character* and consists of producing *Anti Face Threatening Acts*, called by the researcher *Face Flattering Acts*. We can thus speak of *negative politeness towards the addressee’s negative face (the softening of an order), positive politeness towards the addressee’s negative face (a gift), negative politeness towards the addressee’s positive face (softening a criticism) and positive politeness towards the addressee’s positive face (a compliment)*.

¹ For an inventory of these procedures, see Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992.

Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni considers that Brown & Levinson proposed a general framework that enables the description of politeness phenomena in diverse societies. The revisions she proposes to the two practitioners' model attempts to harmonize universal principles with cultural variations. Hence, the five principles of politeness² she puts forward are universal but, at the same time, variable depending on the constraint imposed by the community and on the particular conditions and forms of their application.

6.1.3. Politeness is the Norm

We can assert that politeness constitutes the norm, the cases in which politeness norms are given up being considered deviations, their transgression being more or less serious. Conversational activities are regulated by the principle of reciprocity regarding perspectives, a principle which lies at the basis of the complementarity or symmetry of interactional roles, and which leads to the selection of the suitable strategy (negotiation, cooperation etc.).

Ethno-methodologists highlighted the existence of routine structures or *preferential organisations* of conversational exchanges and analysed the types of reactions (marked or unmarked). An essential concept, which allows the establishment of conversational order, is that of *relevance*, with conversationalists proposing an interpretative criterion, that of *conditional relevance*, according to which, given the first part of an exchange, the second part should be *relevant and expectable*, depending on the expectations sparked by the first part of the exchange. This criterion of *conditional relevance* leads to the idea of preferential organisation, which, in its turn, establishes a difference between preferred or unmarked answers and non-preferred or marked answers. Non-preferred answers are represented by face threats and insults. The notion of preference, J. Moeschler maintains, *is not psychological in nature, but structural, and is based on the marking concept* (1989, p. 158). Thus, conversationalists do not discuss the matter of interactional coherence in terms of sequencing rules, on the contrary, they consider the strategies that enable the management of conversational actions and the facilitation of preferential activities: given the situation of a certain discursive strategy, the following conversational contribution is determined by conditions of pertinence by making a connection with their implications. From this perspective, "*coherence is neither a principle of conversational organisation nor a communicative end, but an effect of structures of preferential organisation*" (Moeschler, 1989, p. 161).

As a consequence, politeness is the norm, impolite behavioural patterns being marked, usually preceded by justifications, hesitations, or other ritualized formulas.

6.2. Face Threatening Acts and Face Enhancing Acts in *The Lesson* by Eugène Ionesco

In *The Lesson*, the speech acts performed by the characters translate the alteration of interpersonal relationships. At the beginning of the play, the Professor, a presupposed possessor of knowledge, finds

² Principles oriented towards the addressee:

Avoid or soften the threats to a) the negative face of the addressee b) the positive face of the addressee.

Produce Anti Face Threatening Acts for the a) the negative face of the addressee b) the positive face of the addressee.

Principles oriented towards the speaker:

Do your best not to overtly lose your a) negative face b) positive face.

Avoid or soften the threats to your a) negative face b) your positive face.

Produce Threatening Acts for your a) negative face b) positive face (Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1992, p. 184).

himself in a position of inferiority, because when the Pupil arrives, he performs a series of threats to his own positive face: “*Professor: Good morning, young lady. You... I expect that you... that you are the new pupil?*”

Pupil [turns quickly with a lively and self-assured manner; she gets up, goes toward the Professor, and gives him her hand]: Yes, Professor. Good morning, Professor. As you see, I'm on time. I didn't want to be late.

Professor: That's fine, miss. Thank you, you didn't really need to hurry. I am very sorry to have kept you waiting... I was just finishing up... well... I'm sorry... You will excuse me, won't you?...” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 47).

We should notice that the Professor's act of apologizing is not preceded by any insult such an act would normally presuppose. The Pupil's reaction to the Professor's excuses takes place indirectly, through denegation: “*Pupil: Oh, certainly, Professor. It doesn't matter at all, Professor*” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 47).

The Professor continues in the first part of the lesson to excuse himself, most often for imaginary insults: “*Pupil : Oh! I don't know them [the chief cities] all yet, Professor, it's not quite that easy, I have trouble learning them.*

Professor: Oh! It will come... you mustn't give up... young lady... I beg your pardon... have patience... little by little... You will see, it will come in time... What a nice day it is today... or rather, not so nice... Oh! But then yes it is nice. In short, it's not too bad a day, that's the main thing... ahem... ahem... it's not raining and it's not snowing either.

Pupil: That would be most unusual, for it's summer now.

Professor: Excuse me, miss, I was just going to say so... but as you will learn, one must be ready for anything” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 48).

The preparatory condition of the apologizing act (the existence of an insult addressed to the Pupil, for which the Professor is responsible) is rarely realized. Such a fact takes place in the situation presented below when, after the exit of the Maid that interrupted the lesson, the Professor states: “*Professor: Miss, I hope you will pardon this absurd interruption... Excuse this woman... She is always afraid that I'll tire myself. She fusses over my health*” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 51). The conditions for the speech act to be successful are now met, and the Pupil responds explicitly by accepting the repair and granting forgiveness: “*Pupil: Oh, that's quite all right, Professor. It shows that she's very devoted. She loves you very much. Good servants are rare*” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 51).

When the Pupil does not manage to give answers to the Professor's questions, he blames himself, thus assuming the responsibility. The act of apologizing is performed implicitly, with the Professor admitting his mistake, which is represented by the transgression of the modality principle: “*Professor: I haven't made myself very well understood. No doubt, it is my fault. I've not been sufficiently clear*” (Ionesco, 1958, p. 54).

The transformation of the relations between the Professor and the Pupil is announced in the stage directions: “*The Professor enters. He is a little old man with a little white beard. [...] Excessively polite,*

very timid, his voice deadened by his timidity, very proper, very much the teacher. He rubs his hands together constantly; occasionally a lewd gleam comes into his eyes and is quickly repressed. During the course of the play his timidity will disappear progressively, imperceptibly; and the lewd gleam in his eyes will become a steady devouring flame in the end. From a manner that is inoffensive at the start, the Professor becomes more and more sure of himself, more and more nervous, aggressive, dominating, until he is able to do as he pleases with the Pupil, who has become, in his hands, a pitiful creature. Of course, the voice of the Professor must change too, from thin and reedy, to stronger and stronger, until at the end it is extremely powerful, ringing, sonorous, while the Pupil's voice changes from the very clear and ringing tones that she has at the beginning of the play until it is almost inaudible" (E. Ionesco, 1958: 46-47), as well as in the Maid's predictions and threats: "Maid: [...] Excuse me, Professor, but take care, I urge you to remain calm. [...] Professor, especially not philology, philology leads to calamity... [...] All right, Professor, all right. But you can't say that I didn't warn you! Philology leads to calamity!" (Ionesco, 1958, pp. 50-60).

The Professor's timidity gradually makes room for violence and aggression, which are materialized by means of a series of threatening acts for the positive and negative faces of the Pupil. Verbal aggressions occur, such as: threats ("Every tongue – you must know this, miss, and remember it until the hour of your death..."), orders ("Quiet ! What do you mean by that? [...] Keep quiet. Remain seated, don't interrupt me... [...] Don't interrupt! Don't make me lose my temper! I can't answer for what I'll do. [...] Silence! Or I'll bash in your skull!"), are quickly followed by non-verbal territorial aggressions in the murder scene. After committing the murder, it is the Maid who assumes a position of superiority. She asks the Professor uncomfortable questions ("Then, you're satisfied with your pupil, she's profited by your lesson?"), or formulates reproaches ("And today makes it the fortieth time!... And every day it's the same thing! Every day! You should be ashamed, at your age... and you are going to make yourself sick! You won't have any pupils left. That will serve you right") and she even slaps him (Ionesco, 1958, pp.

60-76).

Trapped in a space that offers no possibility of escape (the apartment in the middle of which the Professor's study is found), the three characters go through reverse metamorphoses. This space of confinement is like a labyrinth for the characters, the only possibility of escaping being death. From a polite, well-bred, dynamic young woman, the Pupil becomes an amnesic and transforms into a passive object, staring into the void space, suffering from a terrible tooth ache. Contrariwise, the Professor loses his shyness and becomes authoritative, aggressive, and indifferent to the physical suffering of his pupil. Unconsciousness and repressed sexuality become intermingled in the Professor's case; the thirst for power and his sexual desire constitute the two drives that he subsides or recedes whenever he stabs a pupil. Ionesco explains, in *Antidotes*, the meaning of the play: "If we are to find a meaning associated with *The Lesson*, then this can only be the almighty of desire. The powerful irrationality of desire: instinct defeats culture. *The Lesson* is the story of a rape; it is in vain that the Professor continues to teach the pupil arithmetic and philology – philology which leads to crime!-, other things take place there, more violent ones" (Ionesco, 1977, p. 221).

The Maid, an insignificant figure at the beginning (her role was that of taking the Pupil to the Professor's study), starts to exert a considerable influence on the Professor. After committing the murder,

she resumes her function from the start of the play: the door bell rings, a new pupil enters, the same replies from the beginning of the play are exchanged. The repetition suppresses any liberation possibility: once the Pupil is assassinated, the Maid reveals the Professor's madness: it is the fortieth lesson of the day, it is the fortieth murder. The objects present on the scene at the beginning of the play (backpacks, notebooks) materialize the previous murders. The stage directions at the end of the play ("The stage remains empty for several moments. We hear the doorbell ring at the left. [...] She [The Maid] appears as she was at the beginning of the play, and goes towards the door. The doorbell rings again.") insist on the cyclical structure of the play and underline the Professor's failure, who is incapable to overcome his condition, that of a serial killer.

In this play, the laws of discourse and of social behaviour clearly express the changes in power relations between characters. The transformations they go through leave an imprint in their discourses, especially at the level of the speech acts performed.

7. Conclusion

The asymmetric interaction (Professor - Pupil) is organized according to specific structural rules, and belongs to a type of hierarchical relation, with differences among the actors being a matter of statute, imposed through the institutional context. Their actions are in accordance to a politeness code that has as main function the stabilisation and balancing of the interpersonal relationship. Not paying attention to and not assuming statute roles results in pathological developments of the asymmetrical relationship, which makes a hierarchical difference turn into oppression and even outright aggression.

The laws of discourse and social behaviour allow for strategies of balancing the structure of interpersonal relationships. If these are transgressed, the relationship between the interlocutors becomes pathological, to the effect that they will not be able to communicate other than by means of a pre-established and rigid scheme.

The rigidization of the statute adopted by a person on a superiority position (Professor) manifests itself through speech acts at the verbal and non verbal level, and through face threatening acts for the positive and negative faces of the person in inferiority (student). It represents a way of expression and imposition of power. Along the lesson, the Pupil adopts as a means of communication the symptom (the tooth ache), a means of expression that becomes pathological and translates its progressive alienation as the play moves on, as well as the communication's slipping from normalcy to pathology

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