

A socio-cognitive approach to politeness

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Since Watts et al. (1992), Eelen (2001), Watts (2003), Mills (2003), Locher (2004), Arundale (1999), so-called “linguistic politeness theory” as developed by Brown & Levinson (1978/1987) has come under increasingly heavy pressure from scholars who are no longer satisfied with a rationalist/essentialist approach to politeness phenomena. The B/L approach insists on identifying politeness with strategies of face threat mitigation, and it attempts to predict what strategies a speaker will use in accordance with crude undefined social categories such as social distance and power and an undefinable cultural category determining the degree of imposition of a planned act in the culture concerned (cf. Werkhofer 1992). Alternative approaches to politeness phenomena have suggested that a clear distinction be made between first- and second-order conceptualisations of “politeness” and that second-order conceptualisations should be embedded within non-rationalist, non-essentialist theorising. Around the turn of the century the focus had shifted towards looking at how interactants in emergent instantiations of social practice evaluate what they and their co-interactants are doing. The shift was towards developing a view of politeness as being socially and discursively constructed. However, the logical result of this reorientation has been to reduce the term “politeness” to refer to marked forms of behaviour which are not perceived as unacceptable but which are saliently more than just appropriate or politic to the social practice in which they are produced. In other words, “politeness” has been shifted from the field of linguistic pragmatics to that of interactional sociolinguistics, or even social theory. The present paper wishes to go beyond this point and to see politeness not only as a social concept but, more importantly, as a cognitive concept, one which develops through different forms of socialisation and is deeply embedded in an individual’s cognition. It is at one and the same time social and individual. I shall argue that the concept POLITENESS¹ itself is a highly complex network of conceptual blends according to which patterns of behaviour are determined as being appropriate to the social practice engaged in and the community of practice in which that social practice is carried out. It is thus part of what Pierre Bourdieu meant by the term *habitus*. Investigating the concept can only be carried out by meticulous examination of what happens in socio-communicative verbal interaction among co-interactants in social practice, i.e. as it emerges in real-time interaction. I shall thus present an extended conceptualisation of what Fauconnier & Turner call “mental spaces” to relate to blends that individuals make mentally in response to their interpretation of utterances made by others, each utterance also being, in its own right, a complex blend. Through a close analysis of blending processes that we can interpret as having taken place, we can identify instances of where participants are perceived to diverge from appropriate/politic behaviour either positively or negatively.

References

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¹ I use small caps here to indicate that, although I am using the English lexeme ‘politeness’ here to designate the concept, the concept itself is universal to all human beings interacting in social groups.