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Communication Theory

### **Politeness Theory**

In 1978, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson proposed the Politeness Theory. Brown and Levinson (1978) observed similar patterns of language across three different cultures, and noticed “a similar range of language used in making requests among British speakers of English, Indian speakers of Tamil, and Mexican speakers Tzeltal.” (Goldsmith, 2009) They found that people tend to be more indirect when making requests, and communicating things of similar nature. For example, if we want our roommate to hand us the remote, we would most likely say something like, “Can you pass me the remote?” rather than “Give me the remote.” Brown and Levinson (1978) suggested that face was the social force behind variations in language forms. (Goldsmith, 2009)

As Goldsmith (2009) described in the Encyclopedia of Communication Theory, “Politeness theory explains how small variations in how we say things are linked to broader features of social relationships and social contexts”. Brown and Levinson explain these variations with 3 basic assumptions. First, assumes all individuals are concerned with maintaining face. (Dainton & Zelle, 2015)

The notion of face used by Brown and Levinson builds off of Erving Goffman’s (1967) definitions and ideas of face, identity, and framework. Goffman (1967) defined face as “the publicly approved identity we claim in a particular interaction.” Unlike self-image, face primarily focuses on the actions individuals take to promote

a public performance, as opposed to our self-image or social role. (Goldsmith, 2009)  
For example, when I am at work, I act, dress, and play the role of a teacher, and my actions must be consistent with my role.

Brown and Levinson (1978) continued to adopt the work of Goffman, using his notion of positive and negative face wants, and ways to honor another's face. (Goldsmith, 2009) Positive face refers our desire for others approval of our identity. Positive face is met when interactants show cooperation with one another, such as my students performing the desired task with enthusiasm. Negative face includes our desire for our identity or role to be respected, such as showing up on time and not begging to do impossible terrain.

Face can be both lost and threatened by others. FTA's can threaten face. Defined by Garcia, (2016) "A face-threatening act (FTA) can damage the face of the person spoken by opposing their wants or needs An FTA can be either a positive or negative one and can damage the speaker or the hearer." To continue the teaching example, if a student in my class refused to do anything, showed up late and missed information, or did not agree with what I was attempting to teach them, then face would be threatened.

The second assumption is that "humans are rational and goal oriented with respect to achieving face needs" (Dainton & Zelle, 2015) This assumption involves the idea of face management, "the process of using behaviors to ensure others continue to view you in an affirming fashion", (Dainton & Zelle, 2015) as well as the importance of conscientiousness in the choices and decisions individuals make to

help achieve their goals.

Lastly, Politeness theory assumes some behaviors are fundamentally face threatening (FTA's). These behaviors include, but are not limited to, apologies, compliments, requests, complaints, and disagreements. Brown and Levinson (1987) also mention politeness strategies for committing FTA's.

Goldsmith (2009) explains that scholars have, and continue to use Politeness Theory, and do so in a number of ways. Some scholars use PT as a theory of message production (Locher and Watts, 2005), as a rational model of message evaluation (Morand & Ocker, 2002), and as a framework for investigating language-use patterns in various contexts (Kitamura, 2000).

The Politeness Theory started as a chapter in a book (1978), and gained enough research and support to warrant its re-release as a book of its own by 1987, according to the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* (2009). Having such widespread use, there have also been a number of criticisms about the Politeness Theory and its limitations. A common debate is whether it can be applied to different cultures. Another common criticism is that Politeness Theory gives very little, if any, attention to nonverbal communication. Lastly, a debate brought on by Kitamura (2000) is that Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory emphasizes conversations about predetermined goals or requests, and ignores interactions such as a casual conversation. Kitamura (2000) goes on to discuss how Politeness Theory can also be applied to "non-goal-oriented interactions by using naturally occurring casual conversations as data".

Kitamura (2000) used face-to-face conversations between 10 pairs of native speakers. The language is Japanese, but also provides translations of what is being said. The conversation featured in the article is between two women in their mid-30's who consider themselves close friends, and is broken into three segments. Kitamura (2000) uses these segments to demonstrate how the participants (Speaker K and Hearer R) satisfy another's face, as well as demonstrate politeness and support of Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory.

The first segment started off slow, and K progressed into the role of the principal speaker, while R adopted the principal hearer role (as K begins to talk about her situation). In this interaction alone, both participants show that they're interested in the conversation and do not disturb or interrupt each other's speech. When talking about her situation, K begins to mention the idea of "balance", but never specified exactly what she meant. To this, R responded with a paraphrase of her point and used an expression to show her acknowledgement and understanding. In line 38, K does not actually complete her sentence. Kitamura (2000) explains that in this situation, both participants are satisfying each other's positive face. When K vaguely refers to "balance", although not exactly about what type, and R uses an expression to reinforce her understanding, they demonstrate a mutual understanding without needing lots of detail, and can be interpreted as "an attempt not to impose on each other". (Kitamura, 2000)

In the next segment, R offers short responses such as, "Ah, I see, naturally!" to show her involvement in what K is saying, and to show she is paying attention. The

amount of time K takes to speak becomes longer, and her speech rate is faster than the beginning of the conversation. R's repeated agreement and active participation in the conversation both satisfies K's positive face and demonstrates positive politeness by being cooperative and involved with K's role as principal speaker, and by showing enthusiasm and solidarity in what she is saying.

In the third and final portion of the conversation, Kitamura (2000) describes the scene as having "absolute dominance of positive politeness". Both participants speak over each other and the conversation gets louder. At one point, in line 52, R repeats "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!", in total agreement with K. As the conversation continues, R tries to complete K's sentences, and nearing the end of the dialogue, summarizes what K has said, stating that K is trying to avoid overworking, which was "such an effort". This was followed by more strong agreement from K, saying, "That's it, exactly". The conversation reminded me of something a close friend and I would have, too. Again, Kitamura (2000) states that the displays of understanding, agreement, and exclamation and involvement between the participants are all examples of how they satisfy each other's positive face. For example, R complements K by showing strong and enthusiastic agreement in line 59, and K supports of R's summary of her situation in line 61, ultimately honoring one another's positive face.

Kitamura provides evidence that builds on Goffman's (1967) notion of face and Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory, and shows that it can be applied to more contexts than requests or conversations based on predetermined

goals. Kitamura (2000) extends the theory's applicability to casual conversations and gives examples of how the concepts in the theory, such as face, can be found in a conversation with no concrete purpose or goal. Additionally, because the native language used in the research is Japanese, it gives more credibility to Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory by supporting cross-cultural application claims. Although Kitamura's (2000) article started with a critique of the limitations Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory, it ultimately gives credit to the range of communication it applies to.

### References

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What is the Politeness Theory? <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-the-politeness-theory.htm>