Politeness Strategies in Conversational Discourse as a Panacea for Emerging Conflict

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Introduction

Conflicts, arguments and change are natural parts of our lives, as well as the lives of every agency, organisation and nation. This means that conflict among men is inevitable and thus pertinent that people know how to avoid it or manage it if it arises. Conflict is not always a bad thing. It can be destructive, leading people to develop negative feelings for each other and spend energy on conflict that could be better spent elsewhere. It can also deepen differences and lead groups to polarise into either positions.

Most times, conflict cannot be avoided. So, for peace and development, every conflict should be resolved or managed well. Conflict resolution is a way for two or more parties to find a peaceful solution to a disagreement among them. The disagreement may be personal, financial, political or emotional. However, well-managed conflict can also be constructive, helping to 'clear the air', releasing emotion and stress, and resolving tension.

People have different identities and roles, many of which have conflicting demands. These differing identities and roles can be managed in other to avoid conflict. This paper proposes that deployment of politeness in conversation can help people handle conflict. Politeness helps one to avoid offending the other person's feelings and can be the easiest way to avoid tension.

The Concept of Politeness

Politeness is "the expression of the speaker's intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts towards another", (Mills, 2003:6). Politeness is thought of as behaving in a way that is socially correct and shows awareness of and regard for other people's feelings, being careful about one's speech/behaviour in order not to offend the other person. According to Lakoff, (1973:305) politeness is conceived as avoidance of offence.

Politeness can be viewed as deviation from maximally efficient communication. It can be viewed as violation (in some sense) of Grice's (1975) conversational maxims (of cooperative principle). To perform an act other than in the most clear and efficient manner possible is to implicate some degree of politeness on the part of the speaker. Politeness allows people to

perform many inter-personally sensitive actions in a non-threatening or less threatening manner.

Politeness Theory

The theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) is widely recognized and remains relevant to contemporary research as the basis for further elaboration, (Harris, 2001:452). It is also (together with Leech's model) the most common model in use today. Politeness theory is the theory that accounts for the redressing of the affronts to face posed by face-threatening acts to addressees. Politeness is the expression of the speakers' intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts towards another (Mills, 2003:6).

The Notion of Face

Brown and Levinson present their theory as an abstract model of communication. They introduce a Model Person (MP) whose two basic attributes are rationality and face (1987:58). The central notion of face is defined as "the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself". This comprises two aspects, i.e. negative and positive face. Negative and positive face exists universally in human culture.

Negative face is defined as "the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by other". In other words, it is linked to the basic human desire to be independent and free from imposition.

Positive face is defined as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. This aspect of face is therefore the space for, so to speak, filling up the autonomous being with personal content, i.e. self-image that the person wants others to respect and appreciate. The two aspects of face are given attention in communication. This is interpreted as having rational foundation in terms of practical means – end reasoning. In terms of face wants, this means that in order to have one's wants respected and at least partially satisfied by others, one has to pay the same respect and attention.

However, there is an obvious limitation regarding the desire for acceptance and appreciation. People usually have their individual positive face targeted at particular people or groups of people. The notion of face as an abstract notion that interlocutors orient themselves to is claimed to be, a universal phenomenon underlying communication in all languages. In particular societies the notion of face is subject to cultural specification arising from specific understanding of the role of an individual/society, which may, among other things, include different scope for personal territory or limitation on public display, as well as culture – specific pre-conditions of extra face concerns. The two aspects of face are the basic wants in any social interaction, and so during any social interaction, cooperation is needed amongst the participants to maintain each other's faces.

Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies are used to formulate messages in order to save the hearer's face when face-threatening acts are inevitable or desired. Brown and Levinson outline four main types of politeness strategies:

    i.   Bald on – record
   ii.   Negative politeness
  iii.   Positive politeness, and
  iv.   Off-record/indirect

We shall discuss each strategy below:

1.   Bald on – record

Bald on – record strategies do not attempt to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. It is commonly used by people who know each other well, and are very comfortable in their environment, such as close friends and family. With the bald on – record strategy, there is a direct possibility that the audience will be shocked or embarrassed by the strategy. Brown and Levinson outline various cases in which one might use bald on –record strategy, including:-

    a.   Instances in which threat minimizing does not occur.
    b.   Great urgency or desperation e.g. Watch Out!
    c.   Speaking as if great efficiency is necessary e.g. Hear me out…….
    d.   Task – oriented e.g. Pass me the hammer
    e.   Doing the face – threatening act in the interest of the hearer e.g. Your headlights are on!

2.   Positive Politeness

It is usually seen in groups of friends, or where people in the given social situation know each other fairly well. It tries to minimize the distance between by expressing friendliness and solid interest in the hearer's need to be respected. This strategy attempts to minimize the threat to the hearer's positive face. It emphasizes shared attitudes and values. Expressing solidarity, compliments, friendship and minimizing status differences are some of the strategies of positive politeness. Examples:

    a.   Attend to the H's interests, needs, wants. E.g. You look unhappy. Can I do anything to help?
    b.   Use solidarity in-group identity markers e.g. Heh, bros, can you lend me fifty bucks?
    c.   Exaggerate interest in H and his interests e.g. That's a nice haircut you got, where did you get it?
    d.   Avoid disagreement e.g. Yes, it's rather long; not short certainly.

3.   Negative Politeness

Negative politeness strategies are oriented toward the hearer's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. The strategy presumes that the speaker will be imposing on the listener and there is a higher potential for awkwardness or embarrassment than in bold on – record strategies and positive politeness strategies. Thus a request without consideration of the hearer's negative face might be uncomfortable. Example:

    a.   Minimize the imposition: e.g. It's not too much out of your way, just a couple of blocks.

b. Apologize: e.g. I'm sorry; it's a lot to ask, but can you lend me a thousand dollars?
c. Use plural pronouns. E.g. We regret to inform you.

Favour seeking, or a speaker asking the hearer for a favour, is a common example of negative politeness strategies in use. Favour seeking is preceded by elaborate precautions against loss of face to both sides. It often involves signals of openings and markers to be used to clarify the situation. E.g. (You see, or so).

4.   Off-record Strategy/Indirect

This strategy uses indirect language and removes the speaker from the potential to be imposing. When we speak indirectly, we mean more than we say, and we expect our audience to infer what we mean on the bases of what we have said plus contextual information for example. A speaker using the indirect strategy might merely say 'My throat is dry'/'I'm thirsty' insinuating that it would be nice if the listener would offer him water to drink without directly asking the listener to do so. According to Akmajian et al, "one of the main reasons for indirection is either to be polite, to avoid being rude, or to show deference and respect" (2008:452).

The Concept of Conflict

Conflict according to Francis David (2007) is an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence. However, violent conflict is not inevitable and as such is anomaly. It is also defined as the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by different persons or group. Conflict is classifiable in the sense that there could be violent and non-violent conflict, armed conflict which results to mass murder and unarmed counterpart, but each spring up as a result of the pursuit of incompatible and particular interests and goals.

In the words of Ademola (2012:35) 'conflicts that take place within a society may be the result of several factors: for this reason, in the works of classical social theorists from Marx and Comte to Simmel and Sorel explanations for conflict, whether on a small or large scale, whether resulting from interactions between social groups or caused by external factors have been an issue of common concern. This is because most times, it is difficult to point to a single explanation for the emergency escalation, or prostration of conflict whether violent or otherwise. Sometimes when it degenerates to a crisis point the parties involved may even find it difficult to remember what led to the initial disagreement.

Conflictual Situations

An important aspect of conflict analysis that needs to be addressed is the determinant of conflict objective conditions such that their presence would invariably not lead to conflict. Our contention is that the factors which influence the processes leading to the perception of a situation as conflictual are retailed to the way people respond to, or handle the conflict. Conflict is said to occur when one party perceives the action of another party as blocking the opportunity for the others attainment of a goal.

There are two prerequisites that must be satisfied for the existence of a conflict; they are;
  i.   Perceived goal incompatibility
  ii. Perceived opportunity for interference or blocking.

Perception here refers to the way people interpret things around them. In general terms, the perception of events involves the interplay of physiological cognitive and cultural processes which operates among people and groups. Taking it from the cultural aspect, the perception of people and their actions by other people are usually affected by their cultural attitude to issues. When the two parties do not have a common cultural understanding, they may likely misinterpret or misconceptualize the others actions which would likely trigger off negative reaction from the other party.

The cognitive ability of people differs and so does their perception of ideas. There could be much interpretation to an action due to the cognitive ability. One's reasoning cannot go beyond his/her cognitive ability, and when you add academic exposure in that, it enhances it the more. This is indeed a determinant factor in the perception of an idea. We discover that most times there is no laid down general conditions which lead to conflict; it all depends on the way the given event is perceived by the actors.

Research has shown that this conceptualization of verbal politeness or indirectness as a way to show concern for others may not be universal. The employment of any of the politeness strategies during discourse may not be widely accepted, given the individual differences in cognitive ability and cultural perceptions. From the researches discussed in the work of Sheridan, important results found that English-speaking participants (in a study) rated hinting as more polite than Hebrew participants. It can be seen that Hebrew speakers view indirect statements as a less polite strategy to use, whereas English speakers hold converse opinions (5-7). This shows that definitions of politeness vary across cultures.

Conflictual situations only arise when an action is perceived as blocking the opportunity for the attainment of a goal by another person. Conversely, a person or a group may behave with the intension of blocking someone's or another group's goal attainment, as long as the person or group does not see it that way, conflict will not occur. Thus, Leung and Wu (1990) have argued that to understand why conflict occurs in one society but not in another under similar situations, it is necessary to examine the subjective aspects of the cultural groups concerned. Since one's perception may not truly reflect the actual objective of the other person. The ultimate here is that as long as there is life within a society or societies, there is bound to be conflict because it sets in motion the process that typifies human beings as active in analyzing facts as they come. Through the activities in the analyses, they deal with their social and natural environment.

Conflict Management

In the words of Gaya (2004) conflict management is the process of reducing the negative and destructive capacity of conflict through a number of measures and by working with and through the parties involved in that conflict.

Simon Fisher et al (2000) identified five stages of conflict namely;
  i. Pre- conflict stage
  ii. Confrontation
  iii. Crisis
  iv. Outcome

These three stages are usually considered in the management of an existing conflict before it could be resolved. Different from these are other strategies ranging from avoidance, accommodating to politeness strategies in face threatening and many others.

Discussion of Data

Dialogue between couple

Wife: We need to change the furniture now
Husband: Yes! But let's talk about it later.
Wife: Ok!

Note in this exchange, Husband's two parts answer and its pragmatic implication for wife's suggestive request. The first part "Yes" modifies the second 'Let's talk about it later', as being an agreement with wife's suggestion. Although husband's consent on the need for change of the furniture was yet uncertain, the basic agreement in the 'yes' implies a polite regard for wife.

The above interaction is in line with Leech's agreement maxim which states "minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other, maximize the expression of agreement between self and other'. Speakers are quite sensitive to the existing relationship with their hearer and the nature of the interactions, such that they are more inclined to showing agreement rather than disagreement with their hearer, even when they hold different views on a point of conversation.

This maxim of course does not rule out disagreement between speakers. But this kind of answering has the potential of leaving a questioner with the impression that his/her view is respected even when not supported or upheld. This maxim is seen as a strategy employed to ensure harmony in conversation.

The ways of expressing the same speech act differ quite markedly from one culture to another. These differences reflect the different social values and attitudes of different societies. Hence being polite (is a complicated business, in any language it) involves understanding not just the language but also the social and cultural values of the community (Holmes, 2008:280).

Generally speaking, politeness involves taking account of the feelings of others (Holmes, 2008:281). Being linguistically polite involves speaking to people appropriately in the light of their relationship to you, as inappropriate linguistic choices many be considered rude. Making decision about what is or is not considered polite in any community involves assessing social relationships along the dimensions of social distance or solidarity, relative power or status, the degree of formality of interaction and our awareness of social customs (Holmes, 2008:286; Wardhaugh, 2000:272). So we need to understand the social values of a society in order to speak politely.

Politeness varies in different domains; family, school, politics, etc. Teachers often use imperatives to their students. For instance:-
   a. Stop talking please.
   b. Shut the door.

Teachers can use very direct expressions of their meaning because of their high status relative to their students. The rights and obligations in a role relationship such as teacher – student are so clear – cut that teachers can also use minimally explicit forms and be confident they will be interpreted accurately as directives. Students consider everything the teacher says as a possible directive.

Examples:

    a. Blackboard! ('clean the blackboard')
    b. I hear people talking. (stop talking)

Showing disagreement is also seen as a speech act. A person at times makes an expression of disagreement when he/she has different attitudes from his/her interlocutor. Then the relationship between the speaker and the hearer may be threatened. Disagreement is common in everyday conversation.

A boss shows disagreement when one of his employees comes late so frequently. A student shows disagreement to his teacher when he is given a bad mark unreasonably etc. This disagreement is inevitable in conversation because people must express their view(s). So we sometimes disagree to agree.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

Politeness is a linguistic research theory that describes how social dynamics are reflected in our everyday speech or verbal discourse (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Unlike the colloquial presumption that politeness is in reference to manners and pleasantries, researchers agree that politeness is a strategic method used to avoid conflict by saving face for others and showing concern for them, while also maintaining clarity on the issue (Sheridan 2013:4).

Therefore we conclude that, we need politeness when we criticize others, give negative feedback, or do things that threaten people's ego and face, so as to allow social interactions to communicate face threatening information while simultaneously showing concern for others. Indeed, using politeness strategies in resolving a conflict does not abate the message's overall meaning, even if our response is mostly using indirect language (Lee, 1993:13).

According to Sheridan, what is considered polite, or socially normative, depends on the roles we take (2013:5). Some roles require us to be more direct, using on-record and positive politeness strategies, such as a boss chastising a worker, whereas other roles require us to be less direct, using negative politeness and off-record strategies, such as a mother who wishes to express concern for her son.

The implication of this study is important, as communication is an essential component of everyday life. Consequent upon this, we recommend that interactants in a discourse, especially the speaker, should be aware of these politeness strategies and must employ them at varying degrees. This is pertinent since the speaker, sometimes may not know the cultural and personal disposition of his/her hearers; would want them to agree to his/her ideas being put across. In other to maintain face and achieve your goals, partially or completely, there must be politeness, whether negatively or positively, directly or indirectly.

Since conflict is inevitable in life, and may most times be destructive, we need to imbibe politeness as a means of curbing the effect of conflict when it arises. The disagreement may be personal, financial, political or emotional, but should be well-managed as it helps to 'clear the air', release emotion and stress, and resolve tension. In view of the fact that conflict may be personal, financial, political or emotional, the proposition of this paper is helpful to family members, friends, colleagues, business associates, players in the political arena, lovers, doctor-patient relationship and student-teacher interactions, in other to promote peace and successfully resolve conflict in society.

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