Negative Politeness and Interpersonal Harmony

—The Analysis of Request-Response in Family Discourse

Qi Wu[1,2]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Jiujiang University, Jiujiang, China
[2]Department of English Language and Literature, Dong-A University, Busan, Korea
Email: wuqiqiwu@126.com

Abstract

This study aims to analyze negative politeness and interpersonal harmony in family discourse in verbal interactions between "son and mother". Therefore, a pair of conversations which have the contrary effects (one is a failure and the other is a success) was analyzed. Based upon Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Theory, the son's request and his mother's response were put into specific discussion. The results reveal that: 1) negative politeness can lead to an inharmonious or harmonious relationship and "affect" plays a unique role in maintaining interpersonal rapport; 2) the goal's cost-benefit consideration and speaker's perception/understanding/idea influence addressee's response and addresser's attainment of a request 3) the assertion of each other's self-identity and right-obligation obviously enhances the tendency toward an establishment of harmonious relationship.

Subject Areas

Linguistics

Keywords

Negative Politeness, Interpersonal Harmony, Family Discourse, Rapport Management Theory

1. Introduction

Many scholars [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] agree that there exists the close relation between politeness and interpersonal/social harmony. It is true that being linguistically polite contributes to avoiding causing trouble/offence and conflicts/confrontation. However, it does not necessarily mean that to be polite in language use must result in participants' negotiating harmony. There are other

important factors used to establish, maintain, develop and/or enhance harmonious relationships, such as social valves, culture(s), solidarity, power, setting, goal/purpose, formality scale and addressee's interpretation/evaluation, and so forth.

Politeness is generally categorized into two types: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is to meet the hearer's positive face needs [6]. It is solidarity-orientated and gives emphasis on shared values and attitudes [5]. By contrast, it is more likely to minimize the interlocutors "distance and differences" than negative politeness which avoids intruding on others and involves expressing oneself appropriately in terms of distance and respecting status differences [5]. It can be interpreted that being positively polite is more easily to create some rapport than being negatively polite. However, it can be not true for being negatively polite not so relatively easy to maintain a good relationship which is obviously determined by many other relevant "contributors". Combining some such significant ones, negative politeness will be discussed in the following part 3—by focusing on "request" in family discourse (Example 1 and Example 2).

Concerning family discourse (an interpersonal setting), some topics such as "gender, power, politeness, socialization, acquisition" etc. have been studied. However, there are still a lot more o be explored around "request" which is a desirably interesting topic situated in family interaction. One reason is that requests entail the speaker imposing on the hearer [7]—often being negatively polite, and a successful request requires some degree of linguistic strategy which often varies with family values, etc. Another reason lies in its some appealing situated features. Families expect informality and when it is coupled with fixed speaker relationships, such informality contributes to the family's direct style [8]. Three major levels of directness in requests have been identified by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain [9]: 1) direct; 2) conventionally indirect; 3) non-conventionally indirect.

The "request-response" in family discourse is to be explored by analyzing negative politeness and interpersonal harmony based on Spencer-Oatey's Rapport Management Theory.

2. Rapport Management Theory

Spencer-Oatey's rapport management theory first published in 2000 [10] and re-explained in 2008 [11] is an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory [12] [13]. Her Rapport Management Theory represents an important move to correct for the overly reductive and static—albeit in perhaps more in practice rather than in intent—treatment of context in Brown and Levinson's and Leech's theories of politeness [14]. The use of rapport management strategies is influenced by four key contextual variables identified by Spencer-Oatey [11]: 1) participant relations, 2) message content, 3) social/interactional roles, and 4) activity type.

Clearly, politeness is included in that managing social relations through language is defined along the dimensions of solidarity and power, similar to but more detailed than the notion of Brown and Levinson [13]. For instance, different components of distance encompass "affect, social similarity/difference, and different sources of power (referent power, reward, etc.)" are taken into consideration [11]. With regard to the second contextual variable, message content is particularly with the (perceived) costs or benefits, and the third (social/interactional roles) encompasses the perceived rights and obligations. These principles can presumably form a part of the participants' common ground. Activity type is broadly defined as "goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting" (Levinson, 1979: 368), and extensively includes "historically and culturally specific conventions and ideals according to which speakers compose talk or text and recipients interpret it" (Günthner, 2007: 129). Clearly, politeness is included in that managing social relations through language is defined along the dimensions of solidarity and power, similar to but more detailed than the notion of Brown and Levinson (1987). For instance, different components of distance encompass "affect, social similarity/difference, and different sources of power (referent power, reward, etc.)" are taken into consideration (Spencer-Oatey, 2008: 36). With regard to the second contextual variable, message content is particularly with the (perceived) costs or benefits, and the third (social/interactional roles) encompasses the perceived rights and obligations. These principles can presumably form a part of the participants' common ground. Activity type is broadly defined as "goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded events with constraints on participants, setting" [15], and extensively includes "historically and culturally specific conventions and ideals according to which speakers compose talk or text and recipients interpret it" [16].

3. Data and Analysis

The following examples have contrary endings (Example 1 is a failure; Example 2 is a success). To analyze these two variations of family discourse and their differences and the factors maintaining rapport will involve 1) participant relations (affect, power, etc.), 2) message content (costs or benefits), 3) social/interactional roles (rights and obligations) and 4) activity type (goal, participants' interpretations/evaluations, social values, etc.).

Example 1

Son: Don't you even care that I'm failing Writing because you won't buy me an iPad?

Mom: Of course I care! I just don't think an iPad should cost $300!

Son: Jack has a $400 iPad, and he's getting straight A's.

Mom: Well, Jack's dad is a doctor; he can afford to waste money on very expensive toys. I'm just a waitress in a hotel, you know...

Son: How come my iPad is an "expensive toy", but your new skirt isn't?

Mom: My skirt is none of your business. I'm the adult here and I can make the financial decisions for the family!

Son: Well, I think you're making much lousy ones. And they're making me fail Writing.

Mom: You're failing Writing because you won't do your homework! Maybe if you're grounded for eight weeks you'll have enough time to concentrate on your school work!

Example 2

Son: Don't you even care that I'm failing Writing because you won't buy me an iPad?

Mom: Why did you say that I don't care about your grades?

Son: If you did care, you'd get me an iPad.

Mom: What kind of iPad do you want?

Son: Just like Jack has. It does everything! Otherwise I can't do my homework.

Mom: We can't afford an iPad like Jack's right now. Can you work with the desk compuer?

Son: I guess so. But that's old and slow.

Mom: I know. But that's what we've had right now. Maybe if I put in a bit of overtime, we can get it for next semester. Okay?

Son: Okay.

The two dialogues between a son (a non-adult student) and a mother (a caregiver) begin with the same non-conventionally indirect request for an iPad used for writing.

3.1. Participant Relations

According to Yule [17], a linguistic interaction is necessarily a social interaction. Thus, participants need to observe social rules for their utterances are shaped by social distance and closeness. Here, the same request is made in an indirect way by son's using negative politeness strategy and mitigating the potential damage to mother's face. The son does not choose a direct manner (he acknowledges that she has negative face wants, *i.e.*, having a preference not to be imposed on) to make requesting which of course, is obviously is for the sake of his getting a better mark in Writing in school, not for other purposes irrelevant to study. Therefore, he utters, in somewhat tactful way, "Don't you care…?", a rhetorical question for emphasis and arousing mother's attention, and the chosen word "care" is emotionally resonated by mother's response with "care" in her utterance. What's the worse is that the son makes an imposing comparison between a waitress (mother) and a doctor (classmate's father)—different social identities, and the son's direct reference to her "new skirt" threatens her face—he has not such referent power—he neglects their social distance and disrespects his mother and her own power, all of which makes mother angry—rapport relationship is not negotiated in the end.

While in Example 2, the ending is a harmonious one, or at least a harmonious

compromise, which involves other important factors here.

3.2. Message Content

In Example 1, according to the mother's first response—it is very crucial for talk-flow, what the mother perceives is the cost of iPad not the benefit of it. The main reason is that she is a waitress in a hotel which means the incoming of their family is lower than that of Jack's family. And unfortunately, when mother addresses the iPad as "expensive toy", the son mentions her "new skirt" that of course, also costs some/much money. It can be seen that "benefit" of iPad is deviated from each other. Particularly, the son should know that this request (requiring a relatively costly iPad) will possibly be felt imposed by his mother and should skillfully avoid mother's possible refusal. The son also has a lack of knowledge of what "cost" really means to his mother who, as a breadwinner, just is a general worker.

By contrast, in Example 2, the focus is not given on "cost" of iPad but "grades" of Writing, the conversation develops in another desirable direction. Next is some other influencing factors contributing to further explain how to maintain and develop a harmonious relationship.

3.3. Social/Interactional Roles

The participants' social and interactional roles encompass perceived rights and obligations. "Every individual of rights and obligations which determine on entering a social interaction, must recognize a set of rights and obligations which determine how s/he is meant to behave" [18]. The rights and obligations are also represented in Spencer-Oatey's key sociopragmatic interactional principles, with these principles presumably forming a part of the common ground of participants. "These context factors are treated as subjective actors' knowledge" [19]. The mechanisms by which they are established and further maintained are not explained by Spencer-Oatey in any detail, which is left largely to reason-based assumptions.

Here, what's more important is his knowing the fact that it is mother's "obligation" (social role) for her to satisfy his "right" (social roles as a son and a young student)—a reasonable requirement for a useful tool in school study—every mother expect their children to study well in school. It is risky or threatening, if son's right is too much claimed without considering mother's right as in Example 1. It is mother's "obligation" to satisfy son's requiring for a learning tool (his "right") so as to facilitate his getting good grades in school, and from Example 2, such obligation is enhanced by the son and successfully he gets a promised iPad at last—two parties negotiate a comfortable way of relating to each other.

3.4. Activity Type

Clearly, the goal of the two conversations is same—iPad requested by son, and

nowadays such an iPad is possibly popular among son's classmates and beneficial to students' study. Mother expresses her agreement with it (which has her recognized social values) even though it is still expensive in her eyes. Here, it still needs to be emphasized that the mother's first responses in these two examples also reflect how crucial the addressee's interpretations/evaluations are. To great extent, it is mother's interpretations and evaluations that lead these two talks to different orientations and endings. By responding to son's request, in Example 1 she cares about the price of iPad but the grades in Example 2 where her attention focus (caring) is "son's grades" which is different from "son's failing in Writing" and iPad's cost in Example 1. Naturally, "good grades", as two-party's interactive goals, is more closely and easily related to the iPad as son's interactive goal that can benefit son's learning (writing) where mother-son's goals overlap.

According to her first response, impoliteness may still cause damage/hurt to intimate relationships like between children and parents—intimacy is vulnerable to many factors in some circumstances. Obviously, the son has not the same referent power as his mother and his situated impoliteness (even though he still uses some hedging and indirect expressions) and lack of social conventions and ideals shift the interaction to an unhappy orientation—an unharmonious interactive relationship, and the interactive goal is impossible to be attained.

On the whole, if the interlocutors' message contents/focuses are consistent with each other and/or if each other's identity/role and right-obligation are respected or valued, it's more likely for them to avoid possible troubles. In other words, it tends to be risky for the addresser to make asymmetrical comparisons (between a waitress and doctor) or ignore addressee's social identity and relative power/status and rights (not just obligations) as well as social values.

4. Conclusions

According to Rapport Management Theory, these contextual variables can be treated as both pre-existing and dynamic, and suggest that "in the course of an interaction people's initial conceptions interact with the dynamics of the interchange, both influencing and being influenced by the emerging discourse" [11]. In this sense, Rapport Management Theory lies at the cusp of constituting a post-structuralist approach to context—language use is doubly contextual: it not only depends on the context, but is itself also context creating [14].

Politeness being fundamentally situated has long been considered axiomatic. The situated feature of politeness can be roughly evaluated based upon the above-mentioned examples that are associated with negative politeness. In such family discourse, whether a request from children can be guaranteed an agreeable attainment or not is influenced by many complicated factors, such as polite strategy, cost-benefit, right-obligation, addressee's interpretation, and family/social values and so on. Based on this discussion, it is naturally true that emotional resonance significantly affects rapport maintenance, rapport development and rapport enhancement, and a neglect of such role of affect may mislead the

goal expected by the addressee to uncertain orientation and rapport relationship as well as agreement negotiation will be challenged.

Family interaction is an ongoing struggle simultaneously for power and connection [20], and such communication is something that is particularly situated. The factors contributing to interpersonal/social harmony involve discourse strategies/linguistic devices and more importantly, participants' interpretations/evaluations, and most significantly, their initial concepts as well as historical and cultural conventions and ideals, all of which interact with the dynamics of the interchange, creating and being created by (non)language and context, influencing and being influenced by the emerging discourse which is made to be rapport-oriented or deviation-oriented.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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