Politeness processing as situated social cognition: A RT-theoretic account☆

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Abstract

That Relevance Theory (RT) is capable in principle of explaining social or interpersonal dimensions of verbal communication has been adequately documented in the literature (as partly summarized in Wilson and Sperber, 2005). Of all the available attempts at applying the theory in this direction, the most discussed issue is perhaps politeness. Major studies along this line include Escandell-Vidal (1996, 1998), Jary (1998a), Watts (1989, 2003), Christie (2007) and Ruhi (2008). Admittedly, these studies have advanced our understanding of how politeness is processed in the course of communication, but some new issues have arisen, mainly including (i) whether the use of conventional polite forms relative to their default contexts is communicatively relevant or not; (ii) what politeness is taken to be – social adequacy, means of maintaining or improving social relations, or perlocutionary effect; (iii) whether politeness interpretation relies on the recognition of speakers' intention or not; (iv) how frames, schemata, etc. are activated in the course of politeness interpretation such that the same utterance might be assigned different interpretations, polite, neutral, or impolite; and (v) whether the communication of politeness is an individual-based social act or a joint action. These issues make it necessary to continue the discussion further. Accordingly, my aim in this study is to propose a new account of how RT might be employed to more fully explain the phenomenon of politeness. Drawing on the fundamental assumptions of RT, together with some pertinent insights on situated social cognition (Langlotz, 2010), I explore the cognitive processing of politeness in three major types of case: the situated use of conventional polite forms, contents, and associations. Approaching politeness in relevance-theoretic terms, I will argue that (i) politeness processing is a matter of situated social cognition, involving interaction between assumptions derived from various sources in a dynamic context; (ii) situated social cognition of polite behavior as a joint act which may be conscious to varying degrees is relevance-oriented; and (iii) processing different manifestations of politeness in dynamic contexts is communicatively relevant in that it yields interpersonal cognitive effects as part and parcel of utterance meaning.
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1. Introduction

''Politeness'' is perhaps one of the terms in pragmatics most characterized by definitional profusion and confusion. For example, Leech (1983) takes politeness to mean making the hearer "feel good", whereas, for Brown and Levinson (1987), it means not making the hearer "feel bad". According to Escandell-Vidal (1998), ''politeness'' has at least three standard meanings: (i) being kind or friendly; (ii) being tactful or diplomatic; (iii) being civil or socially correct. Here, the first meaning sounds like an individual's attitude, the second like a conversational strategy, and the third like a kind of social code.

Indeed, the polysemous nature of the term "polite(ness)" (Chen, 2013) has been partly responsible for the existing divergent views, developed either from the speaker's perspective or from communication-external perspectives.

To illustrate how politeness might be realized in communication, I focus on three situations where politeness has been said to be manifested according to (first-wave) politeness researchers like Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987), Thomas (1995), etc.

Situation A. Involving the use of polite form(s)[1]

(1) **Context:** *Two elderly women were traveling in a country bus. As the bus approached a scheduled stopping place, one of them uttered (1a) to the driver and then got off. Later, the other woman said (1b) to ask the driver for a stop to get off.* [*Thomas 1995, p. 131*]

a. Next stop, driver.

b. Do you think you could possibly let me out just beyond the traffic lights, please?

Compared to (1a), where the first woman is making nothing more than an informational request, the second woman in (1b) couples her request with some extra interpersonal markers such as the interrogative form, modals, and "please". These markers are considered to be signals of politeness in this situation (Thomas, 1995:131), where the driver normally stops only at scheduled stops on country routes.

Situation B. Complying with Leech's maxims of politeness

(2) **Context:** *A married couple are trying to decide on a restaurant. The husband says (3).* [*Thomas, 1995:154*]

You choose.

According to Thomas (1995:154), what the husband is saying here is beneficial to the hearer and therefore polite (Leech, 1983:107–108), although he has used an explicit directive.

Situation C. Involving the use of accounts or explanations

(3) **Context:** *A man jumped into a queue.* (Watts, 2003:29)

I'm terribly sorry. I wonder if you would mind my jumping the queue. My coach leaves in five minutes and I desperately need to catch it. I got held up by traffic.

Apart from the use of an apology and the expression of pessimism (both are indicative of politeness in Brown and Levinson's terms), the pusher-in explained why he wanted to jump the queue. Again, this explanation suggests politeness consideration in the sense of mitigating threat to the addressees' negative face.

In the past decade, the first wave of research on politeness has come under attack from second-wave politeness researchers like Eelen (2001), Watts (2003), and Haugh (2007) based on a number of problems more or less explicit in their writings, such as (i) identifying politeness with the use of polite forms; (ii) equating indirectness with politeness; (iii) making no distinction between politic behavior (i.e. conventional use of polite forms or contents in default contexts) and polite behavior (use of polite forms or contents in non-default contexts); and (iv) seeing the communication of politeness as a unilateral effort (for a brief critique, see Kádár and Haugh, 2013).

More relevantly to the present goal, though, first-wave research on politeness was undertaken from socio-pragmatic or interpersonal–rhetorical perspectives, leaving the cognitive processes and mechanisms of politeness production and interpretation outside the scope of inquiry. With the rise and development of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995; Wilson and Sperber, 2012), some scholars like Jucker (1988), Clark (1993), Groefsema (1995), Coupland and Jaworski (1997), Wilson and Sperber (1978), Jary (1998a, 1998b), Escandell-Vidal (1998), Christie (2007), and Ruhi (2008) have attempted to tackle politeness phenomena from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective, with varying degrees of success; however, they still leave some crucial issues underexplored, as I shall demonstrate in Section 2. In view of this, the present study will approach the communication of politeness in terms of situated social cognition (Langlotz, 2010) and illustrate how this socio-cognitive process is governed by the presumption of optimal relevance.

The article has six sections. Following the introduction, the second section reviews several existing accounts of politeness from the perspective of Relevance Theory (RT for short). After a brief sketch of situated social cognition and RT in the third and fourth sections respectively, the fifth section demonstrates how processing politeness as situated social cognition manifested in the three types of case illustrated above is guided by the presumption of optimal relevance. The last section is a brief conclusion.

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[1] Watts includes under this heading the use of the whole gamut of linguistic forms and strategies commonly associated with politeness: "grammaticalized honorifics and address forms, formulaic expressions, ritualized and semi-ritualized indirect speech acts, conventionalized means of face-threat minimization and the maximization of the addressee's positive face, solidarity displays, etc." (Watts, 1992:57).