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Emic Perspectives on the Positive-Negative Politeness Distinction

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ABSTRACT: By resorting to the comparative analysis of oriental and western languages (Chinese, Japanese, American English, Australian English) Haugh questions the universal nature of positive / negative face, which he describes as ethnocentric-oriented, and thus should be reconceptualized. To do so, he proposes a dialectic approach based on connectedness-separateness which may transcend the divisions into binary oppositions, and account for both the universal and culture-specific elements inherent in the phenomenon of politeness.

Keywords: politeness, connectedness/separateness dialectic, positive/negative face, culture specifity, Japanese, Chinese, English, contrastive analysis.

RESUMEN: Utilizando un análisis comparativo de los mecanismos de la cortesía verbal en varias lenguas (chino, japonés, inglés australiano, inglés estadounidense), Haugh cuestiona el carácter universal del concepto de imagen positiva / negativa y lo califica como una manifestación de etnocentrismo que debe ser reconceptualizada. Para ello, propone la adopción de un modelo dialéctico de conexión-separación que supere las oposiciones binarias, y que pueda explicar tanto los elementos universales como los específicamente culturales presentes en el fenómeno de la cortesía.

Palabras clave: cortesía, dialéctica conectiva-separativa, imagen positiva/negativa, especificidad cultura, japonés, chino, inglés, análisis contrastivo.

One of the basic premises of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness, which has dominated research and discourse about politeness in linguistics pragmatics for the past few decades, is that what underlies politeness across cultures is the notion of «face», defined as «the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself» (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). In this approach, politeness is conceived as the mitigation of face-threatening acts

through various linguistic forms and strategies, mediated by a limited number of social variables (more specifically, power, distance and the relative imposition of particular acts). The notion of face itself is separated into two distinct desires: the desire that «one's wants be desirable to at least some others» (termed «positive face») and the desire that one's «actions be unimpeded by others» (termed «negative face») (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62). Politeness thus arises through mitigation of an action that can threaten either negative face (for example, a request) or positive face (for example, a refusal). Crucial to Brown and Levinson's approach, then, is the distinction between positive and negative politeness, which they claim underlies politeness in all cultures.

1. The Positive-Negative Politeness Controversy

However, while the positive-negative politeness distinction has been instrumental in stimulating a vast amount of research about politeness in different cultures, it has also been challenged by a number of researchers, notably those studying languages other than English (for example, Matsumoto, 1988, 1989, 2003; Gu, 1990; Nwoye, 1992; Mao, 1994; Kang, 2002; Koutlaki, 2002). In most cases it has been argued that the distinction, in particular the claim that negative politeness arises from concern about autonomy of one's actions is heavily biased towards an Anglo-American conceptualisation of politeness, and so is inherently ethnocentric. Matsumoto (1988: 405), for example, claims that «what is of paramount importance to a Japanese is not his/her territory, but the position in relation to others in the group and his/her acceptance by others». This amounts to the claim, then, that the positive-negative politeness distinction as conceived by Brown and Levinson is not in fact operative in a number of cultures.

Recently though, there have been attempts to refute these criticisms of the positive-negative face/politeness distinction, most notably from scholars working on Japanese (Fukushima, 2000; Usami, 2002; Fukuda and Asato, 2004). The essence of this defence is that that use of honorifics in Japanese, which Matsumoto (1989: 209) claimed could not be adequately explained if categorized as negative politeness strategies, can in fact be accounted for using Brown and Levinson's formula for calculating the weight of a face-threatening act (FTA). In a nutshell, it is argued that even if there is no imposition (on negative face) involved in the particular speech act, if the power difference or social distance is high, then the degree of the FTA will consequently be high, and politeness strategies are thus required (Usami, 2002: 21-22; Fukuda and Asato, 2004: 1997).

Nevertheless, while these scholars defend the positive-negative politeness distinction, they either rarely make recourse to face in their explanations (Fukushima, 2000; Usami, 2002), or use an undifferentiated notion of face, without

distinguishing between positive and negative face (Fukuda and Asato, 2004). This gives rise to theoretical incoherence in their argument. A simple utterance, such as «Today is Saturday» in response to an inquiry as to what day of the week it is, does not appear to threaten the addressee's desire to have his/her wants approved of (that is, positive face), nor the desire to be free from imposition (that is, negative face). Yet according to the formula for calculating the degree of an FTA, it can threaten face when there is a power differential or some degree of social distance between the interactants in Japanese (cf. Pizziconi, 2003: 1479). However, since it is not clear which type of face is being threatened by such an utterance, there is ultimately little room for the positive-negative politeness distinction in this line of argument, as face is relegated to the role of a «social image» that can be lost or saved. If this is indeed the case, then these «defences» of Brown and Levinson's theory are in fact quite misleading, as they amount to substantial revisions of one of the most fundamental constructs underlying Brown and Levinson's theory. It appears, then, that the total abandonment of the positive-negative politeness distinction is inevitable as the field of politeness research develops further.

However, since the positive-negative politeness distinction is apparently useful in explicating politeness, at least in some cultures, as evident in Brown and Levinson's original work drawing from examples in English, Tamil and Tzeltal,[1] yet another alternative to abandoning the distinction is to re-conceptualise it so that it can account for politeness phenomena across a wider range of cultures. Brown and Levinson (1987: 48) themselves originally called for more work from emic perspectives to test this distinction, a call that has been recently echoed by Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1463) in regard to the study of face. It thus may be fruitful to consider the extent to which emic perspectives might contribute to the re-conceptualisation of the positive-negative politeness distinction.

2. Emic Perspectives on Politeness in Chinese, Japanese and English

Politeness in (Mandarin) Chinese, or *limao*, is traditionally defined as being humble about oneself and showing respect to others (Gu, 1990: 238), as recorded

1. Lakoff and Ide (2005: 11) have recently questioned the validity of the data from Tzeltal and Tamil based on Brown and Levinson's status as «cultural outsiders». However, while the issue of the extent to which a researcher who is not a native speaker of the language in question can provide insights into that language is perhaps controversial in the minds of Lakoff and Ide, they give no substantial evidence that any other analyses of politeness in Tamil or Tzeltal are superior to that of Brown and Levinson's, thus weakening their somewhat questionable assumption that native speakers' analyses are always best. Moreover, a more academically rigorous approach, it might be respectfully suggested, would examine the quality of the research involved, not the native or non-native status of the researcher vis-à-vis the language.

in the Record of Ritual (*Liji*). However, in Modern Standard Chinese with the shift away from the emphasis on hierarchical relations that characterised Chinese society in earlier periods, the notions of *keqi* (restraint) and *chengyi* (sincerity) have come into prominence (Haugh, 2006). In other words, politeness in Modern Standard Chinese appears to involve showing restraint in expressing what one wants or acknowledging one's abilities (*kèqi*), and sincerity in relation to one's speech and actions (*chéngyì*). The importance of showing restraint and sincerity in order to be *limao* («polite») in Chinese is apparent from an interaction, observed by the researcher, where an Australian guest was offered tea and biscuits in Chinese. The guest was not hungry and so refused with thanks to show what he thought was consideration towards the feelings of the host. He was thus surprised when the host nevertheless proceeded to put biscuits on his plate. In this case, it appeared the host interpreted the guest's response as being a matter of *kèqi* (restraint), and so to show her sincerity in offering the refreshments (*chéngyì*), she continued to offer the refreshments. The English-speaking guest, on the other hand, thought he was politely refusing the offer and was thus surprised by the host's insistence in offering the refreshments.

Politeness in Japanese, in contrast, encompassed by the notions of *teinei* and *reigi tadashii*, traditionally involves being warm-hearted, kind and courteous, as well as expressing «upward-looking» respect (*keii*) and one's good-breeding (*shitsuke*). Upon closer examination, the notion of «place» (*ba*) appears to underlie emic conceptualisations of politeness in Modern Standard Japanese (Haugh, 2005). «Place» encompasses what can be glossed as *uchi* (the place one belongs) and *tachiba* (the place one stands). Politeness in Japanese, therefore, arises from acknowledging a person as being part of a particular group, or acknowledging his/her position, character or circumstances as distinguishing him/her from others (Haugh, 2005: 47). The context-dependency of «place», in relation to both *uchi* (the place one belongs) and *tachiba* (the place one stands), is apparent in the way the relative importance of these dimensions varies across different situations. When a junior employee is talking with a senior colleague in a work meeting, for example, their respective *tachiba* (the place they stand) are foregrounded. However, at a *nijikai* (lit. «a second meeting») held later at a bar or restaurant, being part of the same group or their *uchi* (the place they belong) becomes more salient (Haugh, 2005: 60). Thus the underlying relative emphasis on a person's *tachiba* or *uchi* in guiding evaluations of (im)politeness in Japanese varies according to the context.

It is also worthwhile to consider the case of English, where a number of distinct varieties exist. Politeness in English is traditionally defined as showing both one's good manners and courtesy towards others, as well as one's good social standing (Haugh and Hinze, 2003; Haugh, 2004: 88). However, while the use of politeness as an indicator of social class is still apparent in British society today

to some extent (Watts, 1999), politeness has become more egalitarian in nature in the emergence of other varieties, including American and Australian English.

Arundale (2005: 13) suggests that politeness in mainstream American English emerges from showing reciprocal approval, and respect for a person's autonomy of action in order to satisfy their individual wants or desires. The importance of these underlying dimensions to the generation of politeness in American English is apparent from the elaborate compliment sequences, and emphasis that is put on fulfilling the wants of others, which can be observed, for example, in American talk shows such as *Oprah Winfrey* or the *The Late Show with David Letterman.*[2]

These phenomena, however, are less evident in Australian talk shows, such as *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton* where «taking the mickey»[3] out of a guest (that is, to tease or ridicule the guest) is acceptable as long as it is done in a friendly way. The underlying dimensions of politeness in mainstream Australian English thus appear to encompass showing respect for others by allowing them to think and do things without impeding them in any way, and showing friendliness (or «mateship», particularly among Australian males), which involves valuing similarity, equality and thus solidarity with others, as well as mutual obligation (Haugh, 2006). The salience of «mateship» to politeness in mainstream Australian English is reflected in the use of the plural *us* to refer to a single speaker when making a request, which creates the illusion that the request is being done not only for the person making the request, but also for (unspecified) others, thereby shifting the focus from the speaker as an individual to the speaker as part of a group of «mates». This is in contrast to politeness in mainstream American English where one's individuality, both in terms of getting approval from others as well as others placing importance on one's individual wants or desires, is highly valued.

3. The Connectedness-Separateness Dialectic

Careful examination of the dimensions underlying politeness in Chinese, Japanese and Australian and American English indicate that they are in fact in dynamic opposition and thus constitute what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) term «dialectics». A dialectic exists when phenomena that are functional opposites

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2. See <http://www2.oprah.com/index.jhtml> for transcripts from the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, <http://www.cbs.com/latenight/lateshow> for transcripts from *The Late Show with David Letterman*, and <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope> for transcripts from *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton*.
3. The verbal phrase «to take the mickey (out of someone)» is an abbreviated form of the Cockney rhyming slang «take the mickey bliss» meaning «take the piss» (out of someone), hence its appearance in Australian English (Duckworth, 1996-2006).

presuppose the existence of the other member in the dialectic for their meaning, and so mutually influence the other member through a dynamic interplay of their opposing tendencies, but are ultimately unified interactively as interdependent parts of a greater whole (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996: 9-10). The manner in which the underlying dimensions of politeness, at least in relation to the languages examined here, form dialectics becomes apparent upon closer analysis.

It was argued that politeness in mainstream American English arises from showing approval, and respecting a person's freedom to satisfy his/her own individual needs and wants. These two dimensions appear to be functional opposites as when showing approval of others, for instance, a person tends to neglect the satisfaction of his/her own individual needs and wants. But it is only by acknowledging the dynamic tension that exists between these two dimensions in interaction that politeness in mainstream American English arises, and so they can be regarded as constituting a unified dialectic rather than dualistic opposites relative to politeness. For example, in allowing guests the autonomy to continue satisfying their own individual needs and wants by offering them choices as to whether they have a drink and the type of the drink they would like, the host may be neglecting to show approval of them. If this relationship is to continue smoothly, then, at some point later in the interaction (whether it be that day or another time), this kind of offer would have to be complemented by attempts to show approval, or the guests may eventually feel the host does not approve of them, potentially giving rise to impoliteness. That is to say, the host must consider both dimensions through the course of the interaction for politeness to arise due to the underlying interplay and tension between them.

The dimensions underlying politeness in mainstream Australian English, Modern Standard Chinese, and Modern Standard Japanese form dialectics in similar ways. In other words, it is through the dynamic interplay of these functionally opposing dimensions - namely friendliness and the autonomy to think and act without imposition in Australian English; sincerity (*chéngyi*) and restraint (*kèqi*) in Chinese; and the place one belongs (*uchi*) and the place one stands (*tachiba*) in Japanese - that politeness arises in those respective languages. Thus in Modern Standard Chinese, for example, in contrast to mainstream American English, a dynamic tension arises in an interaction where a host may show sincerity (*chéngyi*) in his/her offering of drinks by insisting the guest take something, and the guest may show restraint (*kèqi*) by refusing to readily accept this offer.

However, since these dimensions exist in a dialectical relationship, rather than a dualistic one, it is also possible for a person to acknowledge both aspects simultaneously, thereby giving rise to politeness. For example, in mainstream Australian English a host may offer drinks to a guest in a very casual manner to show friendliness, but also leave the guest room to choose the drink he/she wishes, thereby respecting the guest's autonomy to act freely without imposition of the

host's opinions about which drink is best.[4] Nevertheless, it is often the case that one or other of the dimensions of the dialectic are foregrounded, as seen in the previous example from Japanese where the place one stands (*tachiba*) is foregrounded in a workplace, but the place one belongs (*uchi*) might be foregrounded at a casual meeting in a bar or restaurant after work.

Building upon Baxter and Montgomery's (1996: 101) suggestion that Brown and Levinson's positive-negative politeness distinction can be viewed from a dialectical perspective, Arundale (1993, 2005, forthcoming) has proposed that the «connectedness-separateness» dialectic underlies facework and politeness across cultures. Both connectedness and separateness are highly abstract notions encompassing multiple meanings. Connectedness involves the emergence of unity, interdependence, solidarity, association, congruence and so on through interaction, while separateness refers to the emergence of differentiation, independence, autonomy, dissociation, divergence and so on through interaction (Arundale, 2005: 11). Re-conceptualising the positive-negative politeness distinction as a dialectic allows us to account for the underlying tension between positive and negative politeness, in that enhancing the other's positive face necessarily challenges the self and other's negative face, and vice versa (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996: 101-102). And the reformulation of the positive-negative distinction as «connectedness-separateness» allows us to better accommodate both universal and culture-specific aspects of face and politeness, as implicitly called for by critics of Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive-negative politeness distinction, since connectedness and separateness are more abstract notions that can encompass multiple meanings, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

	Connectedness	**Separateness**
Mainstream American English	Reciprocal approval	Autonomy to satisfy individual needs/wants
Mainstream Australian English	Friendliness / «mateship»	Autonomy to think and act without imposition
Modern Standard Chinese	Sincerity (*chéngyì*)	Restraint (*kèqi*)
Modern Standard Japanese	Place one belongs (*uchi*)	Place one stands (*tachiba*)

Table 1: The connectedness-separateness dialectic underlying politeness across cultures

4. The approach proposed in this paper thus differs from the dualistic account of O'Driscoll (1996), where concurrent appeals to both dimensions are epistemologically not possible.

This table summarizes culture-specific instantiations of the connectedness-separateness dialectic that are hypothesised to underlie American English, Australian English, Chinese, and Japanese. However, it is important to note that these underlying dimensions are based on an examination of language use of mainstream speakers of those languages, and thus one would not necessarily expect all users of those languages to reflect these particular formulations. Indeed, it is probable that greater variation in the realisation of the connectedness-separateness dialectic in the generation of politeness will be found upon further examination of interactions involving non-mainstream users of those languages. The view that politeness is negotiated by interactants, as argued by discursive theorists (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005), is thus likely to become even more salient as these varying conceptualisations of the connectedness-separateness dialectic are found to influence the degree to which (im)politeness arises in interaction.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996: 6) have argued that «relationships are organised around the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies as they are enacted in interaction» in their theory of relational dialectics. This also seems to be reflected in the way in which politeness arises. While Brown and Levinson did not originally conceive of the positive and negative politeness as being in a dialectical relationship, the re-conceptualisation of the positive-negative politeness distinction, briefly outlined here, suggests that a more fruitful understanding of these underlying dimensions may be found through an understanding of politeness as arising from the dynamic enactment of the connectedness-separateness dialectic in interaction. In this way, a *tertium comparationis* (Jaszczolt, 2003) for comparing politeness across cultures may emerge, and we can move closer towards achieving the tantalising goal of developing a politeness theory that can account for both universal and culture-specific elements of politeness.

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