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Crossing Boundaries or How Similarities Can Be Dangerous

This article revolves around a couple of examples, or rather anecdotes that illustrate some fine contrasts in politeness structure not only between two languages (English and Serbian in this particular case) and their respective cultures, but also between different subcultures belonging to the same larger culture. The aim of the article is not to demonstrate the explanatory power of any particular theory of politeness – in fact, a rather eclectic model is being used here – but its purpose is to show how apparent similarities – both linguistic and cultural – may prove unfortunate for the interpretation of intended meaning.

1. Introduction

From a contrastive point of view, contrasts, or rather *partial cultural similarities*, between politeness strategies in two different cultures/subcultures may lead to misunderstandings, breaks in communication, may cause some laughs or, at least, unexpected turns and change of the tone in conversation, or other ‘incidents’. The cases described and analyzed in this article aim to show how such similarities between the ways in which languages (or, more precisely, their speakers) encode linguistic politeness may cause more confusion, even harm, than clear-cut differences in cultural patterning of politeness. For instance, let us consider the cultures where belching at the table is a way of showing appreciation for the food served and consumed, or the example of cultures in which stuffing morsels of food into the guest’s mouth using fingers is a way of special ‘hospitality payment’ – such customs often shock travellers (especially Europeans) faced with them for the first time unprepared. After the initial shock, the traveller recognizes a new experience and a new custom, accepts it as part of the host culture and part of his/her own diverse cultural knowledge. On a

second occasion, such patterns of cultural behaviour would hardly cause any commotion. However, partially correspondent cultural patterns, especially those that involve verbal behaviour and choices from the inventory of linguistic means, which display fine nuances of politeness patterning signalled by grammatical means of a language, are much harder to recognize and learn, the consequence of which may be reactions ranging from a wince to a diplomatic scandal.

2. Modelling linguistic politeness

The anecdotes described in this article will be analyzed by means of three related 'tools': the first one, Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP), posits the limited set of four conversational Maxims which can be summarized as:

1. *Quality.*

Participants in conversation should only say what is true.

2. *Quantity.*

Participants in conversation should only say as much as necessary.

3. *Relation.*

Participants in conversation should relate to the propositional content.

4. *Manner.*

Participants in conversation should avoid ambiguity and should be succinct.

The second 'tool' relied on in the analysis of the examples in this article is the Face Theory of politeness as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978), in which the central notion is one of 'face'. 'Face' essentially consists of two specific kinds of desires – the desire to preserve the freedom from imposition on one's personal space, or, in other words, the desire to be autonomous in one's actions and decisions. The other kind of desire concerns one's need to acquire appreciation and self-approval during social interaction. Therefore, 'face' is of dual nature, namely 'negative' and 'positive'. When involved in conversation, both the speaker and the addressee engage in intricate strategies of 'facework,' when they both take actions which are consistent with either negative or positive face. What follows is the distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' politeness, where the former is avoidance based and the latter is approach based.

The third model to which the analysis will be referring to is the one proposed by Lakoff (2004: 88) in *Language and Women's Place*. She establishes the Principle of Politeness to which the Conversational Principle may be seen as subordinate. The Rules of Politeness are as follows:

Rule 1: *Formality*: keep aloof¹

¹ Basically, maintain distance. Here are some linguistic means used to achieve formality: formal and informal 'you,' professional talk, academic passive, academic- editorial 'we,' avoidance of colloquialisms, strict keeping to the standard, the use of titles, impersonal pronouns such as ONE.

Rule 2: *Deference*: give options²

Rule 3: *Camaraderie*: show sympathy³

In positing the Rules of Politeness, Lakoff is surely inspired by the fact that different cultures regard the same instances of behaviour (verbal and non-verbal alike) in the same circumstances differently in terms of politeness. We all have been, at least once, either a witness to or a participant in such situations. Very often, those may get a humorous interpretation.⁴

It is also perfectly clear that much of conversation going on in everyday life is carried out violating one or more of the conversation maxims. Much of such violation is actually done observing the rules of politeness and in order to save face either of the speaker or of the addressee. For example, in a situation where a divorced father asks his 10-year old daughter whether she likes his new girlfriend, the statement ‘She reminds me so much of a cleaning-lady from my school’ clearly violates the rule of relevance (and probably of quality and quantity alike!) and equally clearly implies that the girl does not like her father’s new girlfriend. By employing conversational implicature, she manages to prevent her father’s face loss and to prevent future acts by her father that might endanger her own negative face. Therefore, to use Brown’s and Levinson’s terms, she decides to do what is called an FTA but to go off record in doing it.

When talking about different modelling of linguistic politeness, it is quite impossible not to touch upon the inevitable issue of the universality of politeness. In the maze of linguistic and pragmatic literature on politeness, there is practically no author that would challenge the universality of the notion of ‘politeness’; however, the universality of politeness rules, principles and strategies has been criticized extensively. Practically, there is no author that has pointed to the cultural filtering of politeness, owing to which the ‘emic’ concept of politeness turns out elaborately specified on the cultural – ‘ethic’ – level.

² Typical linguistic means would be: hedges, question intonation, question tags; all kinds of devices that leave the impression that the addressee is given choice of decision, whereas he/she is not and the authority rests with the speaker who ‘conceals’ it; hesitancy; euphemisms.

³ The lessening of distance is achieved by backslapping, telling dirty jokes, colloquial language, informal “you”, first names and nicknames, etc.

⁴ An anecdote about an American woman married to a Serbian has been retold in Belgrade many times; not familiar with the old Serbian custom of making a spitting sound when praising a newborn baby in order to keep ‘the evil eye’ away, she asked, genuinely shocked (in rather broken Serbian): ‘Why are they spitting on the baby?!’

3. ‘Similarities are dangerous’

Let us now turn to the instances of conversation that represent the focal point of the article. We shall try to observe them from the point of view of the three theoretical models chosen, hoping to show where the partial cultural overlapping occurs and what consequences it creates.

3.1. *Conversation 1*

Little J: Mum, Mrs Q has made muffins!

Mother: Did you try them?

Little J: No.

Mother: Why not?

Little J: Well, she asked me if I wanted some, and I said, ‘No, thank you, I can’t, really!’ and she took them away!

Although the interlocutors and the third party (Mrs Q) mentioned in the conversation between little J and his mother are all native speakers of English and seem to belong to the same culture, it turns out the latter is not exactly the case. The described conversation took place maybe a hundred years ago, and it was recalled by Mr J (formerly little J), later in life a British Council teacher in Belgrade in the late 30’s. In the situation where he was offered sweets by a neighbour, little J, brought up on the premise that one does not impose on anyone’s negative face (by accepting the offer you put the interlocutor to trouble, and deprive him/her of some possession) goes for the ‘ultimate’ strategy – he declines the offer, addressing Mrs Q’s negative face, by using:

- outright negation (negative particle *no*);
- formulaic expression of thanks;
- denial of his own disposition (*I can’t*) and propping it up with a modal adverb *really*.

In terms of conversation rules, little J deliberately flouts the Quality maxim (he does not speak the truth, hoping to imply the opposite), or, in terms of Lakoff’s rules of politeness, little J decides to keep distance as a signal of his negative politeness. What are his expectations? That Mrs Q recognizes his efforts to address to her negative face, that she recognizes the implicature and that she repeats the offer, when little J would probably step down to deference level, start off with a hedge (something along the lines of *Well, if you insist...* or the like), accept the offer and end up happily munching home-baked muffins! What little J did not and could not know at that time, that Mrs Q belonged to a different culture than his own, although they shared the same town, street and language, of course! Mrs Q was a Quaker, and her beliefs would not only stop her from uttering a lie, but would also prevent her from leading somebody to utter a lie. If she had offered little J the muffins once again, he would have accepted, but it would have meant

that he had uttered a lie a minute before that. Therefore, Mrs Q performs a face saving act (FSA) that saves both her own face and face of little J's by accepting his refusal as consistent with the Quality maxim, i.e. truthful.

Conversation 1 is here to illustrate what could be called intralingual *cultural contrasts* if we accept that culture is defined as overall ways of a group/people, where religious ways may outline different cultures for next-door neighbours sharing the same language.

3.2. Conversation 2

This is the situation for *Conversation 2*: A British diplomat and his wife are dining in local friends' company at a Belgrade restaurant. The wife, who has recently given birth in a Belgrade hospital, is talking to the Serbian speaking gynecologist sitting next to her and says, loud enough for the rest of the party to hear:

Mrs P: Well, doctor, what I can't understand is why, when one gives birth in a Belgrade hospital, one's husband is not allowed to visit!

(*All Serbian-speaking guests around the table burst into laughter*)

Mrs P: Why, I don't find it funny at all!

The English version of the text is easily readable: Mrs P, who had the experience of giving birth in a Belgrade hospital, does not find the rules of our hospitals agreeable or even understandable; the conversation takes place in a Belgrade restaurant, where she is sitting opposite the head obstetrician at one of the University clinics. She feels strongly about those rules, but, at the same time, she does not want to endanger the integrity and authority of the friendly doctor. Torn between remonstrating against her own (and other women's) emotional interests and the constraints of negative politeness, she goes bold on record with redressive action, and, if she had spoken English, she would have chosen the impersonal pronoun ONE. Therefore, the rule KEEP ALOOF (keep distance) would have been observed and honoured, and, indeed this what Mrs P intended. The choice of ONE as a hedge would have been natural also because Mrs P was actually performing an FTA and she would have looked for some kind of redressive action. However, the problem arises when she decides not to use her native English but the native language of the interlocutor, that is Serbian. So, the actual utterance went like this:

Mrs P: Pa dobro, doktor, zašto, kada ČOVEK porodi se u beogradski bolnica, muž od ČOVEKA ne može doći i posetiti?

(*All Serbian-speaking guests around the table burst into laughter*)

Mrs P (*breaks into English, obviously put off*): Why, I don't find it funny at all!

Having chosen Serbian (which in itself addresses the positive face of the Serbian hosts), she also chooses one of the possible equivalents of the impersonal generic

pronoun ONE, the paraproximal ČOVEK. The decision proves infelicitous, since ČOVEK has (at least) two meanings: the generic one, ANY HUMAN BEING REGARDLESS OF GENDER, and the specific one HUMAN BEING OF MASCULINE GENDER, namely *man*. In the given culture, a *man* can hardly have a husband or, what is even less conceivable, give birth a baby. Back-translated into English, this is what the Serbian speaking guests heard:

Mrs P: Well, doctor, what I can't understand is why, when a MAN gives birth in a Belgrade hospital, the MAN'S husband is not allowed to visit!

So, it is not the choice of ONE which accommodates for human beings of both sexes that is problematic, but the choice of ČOVEK, which can also accommodate for both sexes in some situational and linguistic choices, but not in all. Therefore, although Mrs P's intention was to remain within the scope of the first rule of politeness – KEEP DISTANCE – her intention drowned in the tide of laughter around the table, after which it was impossible to re-establish distance.

Now, *Conversation 2* is aimed at illustrating what we may call an *interlingual cultural contrast*, whose consequence has been a completely misread communicative intention of the speaker, which, fortunately, did not result in any conflict, although it is not difficult to imagine a different outcome.

3.3. *Conversation 3*: The strength of imperatives

Another example of an interlingual cultural contrast between English and Serbian is the use of imperatives. Both English and Serbian have in their linguistic inventories the Imperatives, structurally and functionally correspondent. But their pragmatic value is apparently not the same for the speakers of two languages. In English the use of imperative (and other *mands* for that matter) invariably signals the imposition and intrusion upon the personal space of the addressee, and, therefore, any decision to use the imperatives means doing an FTA bold on record, with possible redressive action, such as the use of 'please' or question tag with distal forms of dynamic modals, if-clauses or other expressions of procedural meaning that serve as politeness markers or play-downs on the perlocutionary force of the utterance. In Serbian, however, the imperative is used much more often even without politeness markers, although there is an inventory very similar to that of English (*molim*, formulaic *ako*-clauses, the Potential of lexical verbs, etc.).

The two examples come from real life: the dialogue that follows has been repeated between a husband and wife hundreds of times, (which also introduces the issue of 'gender culture' within one language):

<i>W:</i> Donesi mi	čašu vode,	MOLIM	TE!
bring-IMP me	glass of water-GEN	beg-1st pers. sing	you-ACC
<i>H:</i> Zašto MOLIŠ?	Traži!		
Why BEG?	Ask-IMP!		

However, when translated into English the dialogue becomes practically void of sense – it cannot even be understood as a joke, no matter which verb we use to translate ‘molim’. Unlike English, where ‘please’ is a lexicalized and pragmaticalized politeness marker, its Serbian equivalent ‘molim’ has more pragmatic functions and on top of that, it is the first person singular of the verb ‘moliti’ (one meaning of which is ‘to beg’ along with ‘to ask for’). So, for the husband ‘Why beg? Ask!’ actually means that he expects the wife to use the imperative without the politeness marker.

Here is another example which shows how partial similarities between linguistic means may cause ‘dangerous’ interference and cultural ‘blunders’ in communication:

(An exam situation)

Non-native examiner to candidate: Read the text, WILL you?

At the first reading, one might say that there is nothing wrong – the examiner, aware that s/he is about to do an FTA by uttering a command, goes for a redressive action and chooses a question tag. However, when a group of native speakers of English were tested for the reaction to this particular utterance in the exam situation, a majority of them reacted describing it as ‘threatening,’ ‘impolite,’ some even rated it as ‘arrogant,’ signalling ‘impatience,’ etc.

However, when native speakers of Serbian (students of English) were tested for the reaction to the utterance, they found it ‘acceptable,’ ‘polite enough,’ even ‘adequate’. When asked to perform the same speech act in Serbian, their choice was mainly:

Pročitajte	tekst, (molim vas)!
Read-IMP	text (please)
Hajde	pročitajte tekst.
Come on	read-IMP text

or even

Hoćete	da pročitate tekst, (molim vas)!
Will-2 nd pers.	to read text (please)

The last one, which students considered the most polite, actually contains the Serbian modal HTETI which does stand equivalent to the English WILL, but only partially. It has lost the volitional meaning entirely in polite structures as the one above and is fully pragmaticalized as hedge.

However, the most striking feature here is the prevalent use of the imperative, which is felt appropriate and not impolite at all. The similarity between the verbs HTETI and WILL causes the mother tongue strategy to interfere with that in the foreign tongue.

5. Concluding remarks

The idea behind analyzing the above described situations was to cast some finer contrastive light on the politeness structures of English and Serbian, which, in a possible typology of politeness would definitely belong to the same type on a more salient level. However, the fact that both languages abound in expressions of procedural meaning does not necessarily mean that they use them in the same way, and they do not definitely exploit them to the same extent. As illustrated by *Conversation 1*, politeness strategies vary considerably between subcultures of a larger culture, let alone from culture to culture. The ‘seductive’ partial equivalencies established between both between linguistic means and strategies which lure the non-native speaker into the trap of relying on the positive transfer from his/her own language and vice versa, can often cause adverse effect to that intended and completely change the reading of the speaker’s communicative intention.

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