

## **LINGUISTIC POLITENESS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES**

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Abstrak. Dalam artikel ini, penulis mendiskusikan kesantunan bahasa dalam budaya yang berbeda. Kesantunan merupakan salah satu aspek yang perlu diperhatikan pengguna bahasa dalam komunikasi lintas budaya. Setiap budaya memiliki prinsip-prinsip kesantunan masing-masing dalam komunikasi lisan. Kesantunan tersebut dapat meliputi: salam, penolakan atau penerimaan sebuah tawaran, sapaan, admonisi, pembicaraan bisnis

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Human beings as social creature need to communicate or interact to each other. In doing communication or interaction, they use language as a means of communication. The interaction may happen in intra-group or intergroup. In intergroup interaction misunderstanding is likely to happen if people do not pay attention to the communication rules in each other language. One of the ways to avoid misunderstanding is by knowing how to behave politely according to the norm of each other language. Each language has different way to show politeness. This paper is aimed at the discussion of politeness in different cultures. By understanding the rules of politeness in different culture, hopefully the communication done by people from different cultures will run smoothly.

### **LANGUAGE AND CULTURE**

Language and culture are two inseparable items. Mulyana (2004: 73) states that “language is a cultural representation, or a ‘rough map’ that reflects culture, including world views, beliefs, values, knowledge, and experiences which are practiced by related communities.” Chaer and Agustina (2004:164) describe that “culture is everything that concerns human life including regulations or law that prevail in society products made by human beings, habits and tradition which are usually done, and interaction and communication devices used i.e. language and other nonverbal communication.” Wardhaugh (1988: 212) explain that one of the claims concerning the relationship between language and culture is that the culture of people is reflected in the language they employ because they use their language in ways that reflect what they value and what they do. From the definition of language and culture above, it can be inferred that language and culture are two closely related items i.e. language reflects culture and culture includes language.

### **LANGUAGE AND POLITENESS**

Since language reflects the culture of the language owner, so in their speech performance people at the same time express their cultures. One of the cultures reflected in language is politeness.

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Spolsky (2001:19-20) sees politeness as the recognition of the listener and his or her rights in the situation. Each language may have certain formula to show politeness. For example, in English requests are made indirectly as a question such as “could you possibly pass me the salt?” or a statement like “I think that is the salt beside your plate”, or by adding formula like ‘Please’ and ‘if you would be so kind.’

In Javanese the difference in social status between a speaker and a listener will determine the choice of expression used. For example, the expression “*Apa pada slamet?*” and “*Menapa sami sugeng?*” both meaning “Are you well?” but the first is used to greet a subordinate and the second is used to greet a superior (Ohoiwutun, 1997: 87).

In line with Spolsky, Holmes (2001: 268) states that politeness involves taking account of the feeling of others, so being polite means to make others feel comfortable. Linguistically, being polite means to speak appropriately based on the relationship between the speaker and the listener. In other words, in speaking to one another people have to select their words carefully according to the situation in which they are speaking. For example, when someone wants to say something, he or she will choose an appropriate way to say it since inappropriate words choice may be considered rude. Moreover, politeness according to Yule (1997: 60) is “the means employed to show awareness of another person face.” The term *face* means a person’s self image. In Brown and Levinson’s term (in Cook, 1992: 34) acknowledge the face of other people means that “people both avoid intruding upon each other territory (physical territory, a particular field of knowledge, a friendship) and also seek to enlarge the territory of others.” Yule (*ibid*) states that awareness showed to another person’s face when he or she is socially close is called friendliness, camaraderie, or solidarity.

In everyday communication people may often unwittingly offend each other by saying something that threat one’s expectation regarding public self image (*face want*). This is called *face threatening act*. Alternatively, one may say something that lessens the possible threat to save other people face. This is called *face saving act*. When one intends to save another’s face, he or she should pay attention to the hearer’s negative face wants that is the hearer’s need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed by others. He or she should also pay attention to the hearer’s positive face that is the need to be accepted by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others (Yule, 1997: 61-62).

Both Holmes (2001: 268) and Yule (1997: 64) differentiate politeness into two types namely, positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is an appeal to solidarity toward others, that is how to make hearer feel good or to make him or her feel that his or her values are shared. Positive politeness is used to extent intimacy, to imply common ground or to share wants. When the boss suggests that the subordinate should use first name to him or her, this is a positive politeness move, expressing solidarity and minimizing status difference. Negative politeness pays people respect and avoids intruding them. Negative politeness is usually expressed by indirect directive such as “Could you stay a bit later tonight, do you think, and finish this job?” Negative politeness includes expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status difference, for example, using title + last name to the superiors or older people we do not know well.

Moreover, in relation to politeness principle in the process of communication, Grice in Brown (2000: 257) proposes four maxims called conversational maxim, namely:

(1) Quantity

This maxim requires each participant in a conversation says as much as is necessary for understanding the communication.

(2) Quality

This maxim obliges each participant in a conversation to say only what is true.

(3) Relevance

This maxim obliges each participant in a conversation to say only what is relevant.

(4) Manner

This maxim requires that what the speaker talk about must be clear. Being clear means that the speakers have to: (a) avoid obscurity, (b) avoid ambiguity, (c) be brief, and (d) be orderly.

The other politeness principle is proposed by Chaer and Agustina (2004: 172). They state that speech performance must be accompanied by the norms that prevail in the culture of the language society. This is called language etiquette. Further Chaer and Agustina (*ibid*) state:

“Language etiquette regulate about: (1) what have to say at certain time and situation to a certain participant concerning with social status and culture in the society; (2) what language variety is the most appropriate to be used in sociolinguistic situation and in certain culture; (3) when and how to use the turn-taking and interrupt the speech of others; (4) when to have to quiet; and (5) how the voice quality and physical attitude in speaking is.”

The language etiquette proposed by Chaer and Agustina above indicates that in interacting with others people must have sociolinguistic competence i.e. the knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and of discourse (Brown, 2000: 247).

## **LANGUAGE POLITENESS IN DIFFERENCE CULTURE**

It has been mentioned previously that every culture has different norms including language norms. Concerning with the language norms, every language may have different politeness principle. In verbal cross cultural communication people have to learn politeness principle in the languages of the other cultures in order to avoid misunderstanding since, as it is stated by Holmes (2001: 279), “the appropriate ways of speaking in different communities are clearly quite distinctive in a range of areas. Being polite involves understanding the social values which govern the way social dimensions such as status, solidarity, and formality are expressed.” This subtitle presents the phenomena of linguistic politeness in different cultures.

### **Greeting**

“Hello”, “How are you?”, “Have you eaten yet?”, “Where are you going?” These are acceptable greeting in different cultures. A greeting is a way of being polite or friendly to someone. In many languages a question is used as a greeting, but it is not a

real question. The expected answer for the question is ritualistic. For example, when someone asks about a person's health: "How are you?", he or she does not expect the person to tell about his or her health when he or she replies. People reply to this question with a fix expression such as "I'm fine thanks." In most languages greeting is usually followed by 'a small talk' that is the little things to talk about at the start of conversation. In English speaking countries people often make small talk about the weather.

The way people greet each other and the things they talk about may be different from one language to another. A sort of greeting which is acceptable in some countries may be not acceptable to other countries. The following illustration will describe it.

A Chinese met his Germanic colleague at their campus. Then he asked, "Where are you going?" He got an unfriendly response that surprised him, "Of course, I'm going to the class. Why do you ask?" For the Chinese, "Where are you going?" is an idiomatic expression to contextualize such informal greeting. For the Germany, however, the expression contextualizes an excessive curiosity (Mulyana, 2004: 132).

In China or Indonesia, the expression "Where are you going?" is an acceptable and friendly greeting. It is a greeting expressed by the Chinese or Indonesian when they meet someone they know. However, this kind of greeting may be unacceptable for some European or western countries. They consider such greeting as an excessive curiosity.

### **Acceptance and Refusal of an Offer**

Polite acceptance and refusal may vary from culture to culture. The acceptance or refusal concerning with an offer may be expressed directly by saying 'Yes' for an acceptance or 'No' for a refusal. Direct acceptance or refusal of an offer may be polite in some cultures, in others, however, it may be considered weird or impolite. Consider the following exchanges:

Exchange 1:

Rose: "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Paul: "Yes, please" (or "No, thank you.")

Exchange 2:

Tuan rumah: "*Mari silakan minum.*"

(Host : "Please enjoy your tea/coffee.")

Tamu : "*Tak usah repot-repot, Bu*"

(Guest : "Please don't bother.")

Exchange 1 is usually expressed by the Western or European speakers. It is easy for them to say 'yes' or 'no' bluntly when they accept or refuse to an offer and it is merely polite in their cultures. Exchange 2 reflects Indonesian culture. When Indonesian get an offer such as drink, food, etc. they tend to answer using refusal expression although they actually expect the offer. For Indonesian it is difficult to say 'yes' or 'no' directly for an offer. A nearly similar case also happens for Chinese culture. Consider the following illustration:

One afternoon in China, a woman professor from Germany invited her colleague, Ms Han, to visit her. After they had sat, the professor asked Ms

Han whether he wanted to drink tea or coffee. Ms Han answered. “No. No thank you.” Because the professor wanted to drink coffee, she made it for herself and once more offered Ms Han but she still refused the offer. So the professor drank the coffee for herself while she was talking with Ms Han. A few days later, the Germanic professor met another colleague of hers who informed her that Ms Han felt a little bit surprised because the professor did not serve her any drink or food when she visited her. In Chinese culture, if a guest was offered drink or food, he or she was expected to refuse until three times in order to be polite. The native, on the contrary, had to give his or her offer many times and even force the offer to make sure that the guest did not really want it (Mulyana, 2004: 133-134).

From the illustration above, apparently the Chinese consider it is impolite to accept food or drink when it is first offered. They are expected to refuse an offer until three times. The Chinese think that if they accept food or drink when it is first offered, it means that they are greedy. Almost similar cases happen in some parts of India and Taiwan, as well as in parts of Arabic-speaking world. Their cultures consider that it is impolite to accept food when it is first offered. They just can accept the offer when it is on the third offer and similarly, only a third refusal is considered definitive by the offerer (Holmes, 2001: 276).

### Address System

Most languages have specific linguistic features that mark the relationship of the speakers. In English this relationship is marked by the use of address system. In America, for example, people who know each other well use first name in both informal and formal situations (such as *James* for *James Arthur Phillips*). When people do not know each other well or who differ in status the formal address: title + family (last) name is used such as Dr. Johnson, Ms. Newman, etc. For American it is possible to change from a formal address to the informal one, but the superior (in age, position, etc.) should suggest it. For example:

- A. Why don't you call me Bill?
- B. All right, Bill (Tillit and Bruder, 1993: 15).

In Indonesia the choice of address words usage is very complicated because of the wide range of addressing forms. Kridalaksana in Chaer and Agustina (2004: 172-173) states:

“There are nine kinds of addressing forms, namely: (1) pronoun such as *engkau* and *kamu*; (2) proper names such as *Dika* and *Nita*; (3) kinship terms such as *bapak*, *ibu*, *kakak*, and *adik*; (4) title and rank such as *profesor*, *letnan*, and *kolonel*; (5) nominative forms of the doer (pe + verba) such as *penonton*, *pendengar*, and *peminat*; (6) nominative forms + ku such as *Tuhanku*, *bangsaku*, and *anakku*; (7) deictic words such as *sini*, *situ*, or *di situ*; (8) the others nominative forms such as *awak*, *bung*, and *tuan*; and (9) zero form, without word.”

When an Indonesian wants to address someone, he or she must decide what appropriate address form he or she must use. He or she must consider whether the addressee is older, equal, younger, or children; whether the social status is higher, equal, or lower; whether the situation is formal or informal; whether the relationship with the addressee is close or not; whether the addressee is a woman or a man; etc. All of these factors will determine what address form is the most appropriate to use.

### **Admonition**

In some cultures, maintaining group harmony is very important. People from such culture do not like to be embarrassed or humiliated by others in public. Notice the illustration below:

In Thailand a Germanic manager did not like his secretary who was always late to work for at least 30 minutes and sometimes an hour. He knew that the traffic in Bangkok was bad, but this was too much for him. One morning the manager got very angry when she arrived late at the office while the others staff were busy. He scolded her in front of others and told her that if she was late again she could lose her job. Then the secretary made a resignation (Mulyana, 2004: 137).

In the illustration above, it seems that the Germanic manager has made a fault. In Germanic culture admonishing or criticizing a person in public is acceptable but in Thailand admonishing or criticizing a person in public is considered very rude because it causes a person to lose face.

### **Business Talk**

Business talk can be done not only in the office but also at a restaurant or a café so that people can do business as well as have a good meal. Ramshaw in Soars (1997: 40) gives some tips about having business talk accompanied by a meal.

“The British are happy to have a business lunch and discuss business matters with a drink during the meal: Japanese prefer not to work while eating. Lunch is a time to relax and get to know one another, and they rarely drink at lunch time.

The Germans like to talk business before dinner; the French like to eat first and talk afterward. They have to be well fed and watered before they discuss anything.”

From the illustration above, it can be inferred that different cultures have different rules concerning business talk done during the mealtime. For the British business talk can be done at lunch time and it is not trouble at all to discuss business matters while they are eating and drinking. On the contrary, the Japanese do not like to talk business matters while they have lunch. For the Japanese lunch is time to relax and get to know one another. For the Germans business talk is done before dinner, while the French prefer to be well fed and watered before they talk. People who want to have business talk accompanied by a meal with one of those countries have to take account the rules that prevail in those countries so that they can avoid a misunderstanding.

## **CONCLUSION**

Politeness is one of the cultural aspects that people must pay attention to in cross cultural communication. Concerning with verbal politeness, every culture has its own politeness principles. In speaking with other people from different cultures, someone must follow politeness principles of those cultures so that a misunderstanding can be avoided.

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