Doing being (im)polite: socio-pragmalinguistic analysis of interaction of film characters (Becoming Jane)

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1 Introduction

Within the past three decades, politeness has received considerable attention in the field of pragmatic and sociolinguistic research. Its phenomena represents one of the critical elements of social behaviour being present in all human communication. The importance of politeness goes even further, since “they raise questions about the foundations of human social life and interaction” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 1). The principles of politeness which were first formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987) represent the most influential theoretical foundation for the analysis of politeness in the fields of pragmatics and other areas of language study.

The present work deals with the socio-pragmalinguistic analysis of the dialogues used in the fiction film, namely Becoming Jane. To analyze the way the film characters of the selected film speak politely was a decision made based on the assumption that ideology of polite style was a dominant factor of a discourse in the eighteenth century Britain. Based on Brown and Levinson’s classification of politeness strategies, the main purpose of the analysis is to determine the impact of socio-cultural variables (i.e. degree of social distance, social class) on the choice of politeness levels used by the interactants in the selected dialogues. Moreover, the present study attempts to investigate the impact of social context as well as intimacy and distance on the choice of forms of address.

1.1 On the historicity of politeness

Importance of tracing the history of the term ‘politeness’ has been particularly emphasized by Ehlich arguing that politeness “is not only a historical phenomenon which belongs to the twists and turns of history […], but that the recognition of its historicity is an almost inalienable condition for understanding it” (2005, p. 105-106).

The English term ‘polite’ has its roots in the fifteenth century and was derived from the Latin word politus, signifying ‘smoothed’ or ‘accomplished’ (Marquez-Reiter, 2000, p. 1). The origins of politeness are inextricably linked with court life, since court represented a model of appropriate social conduct in the Middle Ages (Marquez-Reiter, 2000). In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, politeness contributed to establishing and maintaining “strictly hierarchical and elitist” society and served as an instrument of “enforcing social differences” (Watts, 2003, p. 33). During this period, the term ‘polite’ appeared in association with ‘refined courteous manners’ pertaining to upper class demeanour.
(Marquez-Reiter, 2000, p. 1). However, politeness started becoming connected not solely with polite manners but also with civilization (Watts, 2003, p. 33). As suggested by France, politeness could be seen as a means of achieving harmony in society and simultaneously it could be regarded as “an oppressive force, taming the individual, imposing conformity and deference” (1992, p. 4). Though some researchers do not solely see politeness as ‘etiquette’, they also do not exclude the possibility that “the smooth, polished brightness is ‘merely’…superficial and deceptive’, hiding far less altruistic intentions” (Watts, 2003, p. 33).

All in all it can be said that politeness has always been a critical element of social conduct, indisputably associated with public power, success and prestige.

1.2 Different views on Politeness

The principles of politeness have emerged as an area of interest of many linguists in the last three decades. Following the major theoretical frameworks developed by Lakoff, Leech and Brown- Levinson, the phenomenon of politeness has become the focus for research in the field of recent sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Disciplines dealing with the study of language in social interaction have taken an interest in achieving better understanding of the concept of politeness. As conceived by Watts, Ide and Ehlich, “politeness touches on issues that are crucial not only for the sociolinguist and social anthropologist but also in the life of every individual human being” (Placencia, 2007, p. 1). The major theories of politeness formulated by Lakoff, Leech and Brown and Levinson have been essentially based on the principles of Gricean conversational maxims, Austin's and Searle’s theories of speech acts and Goffman’s notion of “face”.

Regarding the approaches to linguistic politeness, Brown and Levinson’s framework has represented the most comprehensive and influential model to date. Similar to Lakoff and Leech, it has been built upon Grice’s framework of the Cooperative Principle (CP), yet, it does not supplement Grice’s maxims by other pragmatic rules or principles. Instead, it deviates from the CP so that politeness and interpersonal relationships could be expressed and established (Geyer, 2008, p. 16). Central to Brown and Levinson’s theory is the notion of ‘face’, which might be referred to as “the individual’s self-esteem” (Fraser, 1990, p. 220). With regard to the mentioned concept, both linguists define politeness as “a form of emotional control serving as a means of preserving face” (Behm, 2008, p. 9). The universality of the model proposed by Brown and Levinson has been called into question by many scholars regarding different views on politeness and face in respect to a socio-cultural context. Notwithstanding, Brown and Levinson’s theory of face work has been of central importance to research conducted in the field of politeness.

1.3 Polite society in the 18th century Britain

Throughout the eighteenth-century England, the term ‘politeness’ assumed particular prominence as a key word which applied to a range of settings and various social fields. The notion how to behave was a part of a social revolution greatly affecting the
wealth of culture of the eighteenth century England. Moreover, politeness was associated with refined sociability, which was inseparably embedded within the ‘polite’ language. Characteristic of the society during the Regency were strict social rules and codes of behaviour, which applied to almost every sphere of everyday life. Since every social interaction had its own protocol, everyone was supposed to know their place in the society and follow particular obligations and restrictions. The hierarchy represented the central core of the social life (Irvine, 2005).

As Sell (1991, p. 208) points out, in this period of British history, politeness was inseparably connected with “social class and socio-political power (Watts et al. 2005, p. 44). Those who did not cultivate politeness within the language encountered severe social discontent and political repression (Ibid.).

The concept of politeness played a key role in the formation of social class system in Britain and in the evolution of Standard English. In this respect, politeness turned into the major element of a dominant ideological discourse in the eighteenth century Britain. It is important to emphasize that the way in which people communicated with one another served as a mirror which reflected their relative social positions. For example, it was considered impolite for a person of lower rank to end the conversation. Polite forms of conversation were important for elevating a person towards a higher level (Hellier, 2003). Throughout the eighteenth century, the aspiring middling sort of people used the trappings of gentility to obtain respectable position in society. Those who did not adopt polite comportments remained marginalized and isolated and had no place among the company of the genteel (Watts et al., 2005). Therefore, by the end of the eighteenth century, plenty of people assimilated themselves to polite culture by absorbing the rudiments of polite conversation (Hellier, 2003).

1.4 Politeness strategies in the interaction of movie characters (Becoming Jane)

The film Becoming Jane (2007), which was employed as a data source of this study represents a fictional biography of Jane Austen (1775-1817), the British author of the Regency period. The pivotal theme of the film is the romantic relationship between Jane Austen and the love of her life – Tom Lefroy. Rather than offering actual facts, Becoming Jane (2007) captures and focuses mainly on the author’s aforementioned romantic experience, which had a considerable impact on her art and on subsequent decisions that she made during her lifetime.

Based on Brown and Levinson’s classification of politeness strategies, the sociopragmatic analysis attempts to figure out:

1. the impact of socio-cultural variables (e.g. power relationships, degree of social distance or intimacy, social class backgrounds of the participants, etc.) on the choice of politeness levels used by the interactants in the selected dialogues;

2. the politeness sensitivity to the social context in terms of the dichotomy between discernment and volition.
Apart from Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, the analysis takes into consideration the postmodern approach to politeness which interprets interaction as a discursive dynamic struggle. Simultaneously, the analysis attempts to discuss the particular politeness strategies on the basis of the dichotomy between the two types of linguistic politeness, i.e. volition and discernment. Moreover, the present study attempts to investigate the impact of social context as well as intimacy and distance on the choice of forms of address.

The analyzed dialogues are carried out between the two participants that were chosen in relation to the particular socio-cultural aspects. Namely, these include: social class background including power relationships and degrees of intimacy and social distance between the participants. Apart from these factors, the attitudinal distance (liking/disliking) or so-called affect factor has also been taken into account, since it turned out to have considerable influence on the choice of politeness levels. The theory applied in the analysis of the corpus is the one elaborated by Brown and Levinson (1987), since the concept of face plays a crucial role in the interactant’s realization of politeness strategies.

1.5 Introducing the film

* Becoming Jane* (2007) represents the period romance story reflecting the early life of noted British author, Jane Austen. The film is based on the book “Becoming Jane Austen” chronicled by Jon Hunter Spencer, who worked as the historical advisor to the film. Directed by Julian Jarrold, the film weaves fact and fiction providing enough time for the pivotal character development.

From the start, the film assumes that the society is split in its attitude towards marriage. Whereas, on the one hand, there is a prevailing opinion that “money is absolutely indispensable” to life (Mrs. Austen), on the other hand, the opposing view is advocated by the other half of society, i.e. a “small fortune will not buy” love (Jane).

The whole plot revolves around the romantic experience of Jane Austen (Anne Hathaway) and Tom Lefroy (James McAvoy), whose first encounter results in the author’s prejudice against the young Irish law student performing as a wicked man who has a reputation for drinking, gambling and womanizing. In spite of Austen’s initial miscommunication, both protagonists eventually fall in love with each other and decide to escape the financial pressure from Lefroy’s family. However, Lefroy is financially dependent on his uncle, Judge Langlois (Ian Richardson) and the elopement with Austen would cause him and his family serious financial problems. Consequently, pressure from family and financial constraints placed on both protagonists lead to their separation.

Apart from the two aforementioned protagonists, the film features also other characters, such as Jane Austen’s parents- the reverend Austen (James Cromwell) and Mrs. Austen (Julie Walters). It is worth mentioning that the way Austen’s parents acted is very similar to that of parents in Pride and Prejudice. While Mr Austen takes his daughter’s side and encourages her to write, major ambition of Mrs. Austen is to find a suitable husband for her daughter. The story of film involves some potential suitors of Jane Austen such as
Mr. Wisley (Laurence Fox) who is portrayed as the nephew of the fictional local aristocrat Lady Gresham (Maggie Smith). In addition, the script provides space for other minor but important characters including Jane’s sister Cassandra (Anna Maxwell Martin), brother Henry Austen (Joe Anderson) and cousin, Eliza de Feuillide (Lucy Cohu).

Dialogue 1:
The scene takes place in the house of the Austen family shortly after Tom comes to visit his uncle living in Hampshire. Tom should accompany his uncle for a shooting; however, during preparation Mr Lefroy finds out that his nephew does not know how to handle a gun. During the scene, Tom’s cousin Lucy comes to visit Tom. As she sees him holding an outstretched gun, she gets scared and screams so loud that Tom gets panicked and accidentally shoots into the wall. Luckily, no one is hurt. When Mr Lefroy realizes that Tom does not know how to handle a gun, he persuades him to take a walk rather than accompany him for a shooting.

Scene 1 (19:37- 20:08)
01 Mr Lefroy:  Careful there, old fellow
02 Tom Lefroy:  Fine piece, Mr Lefroy.
03 Mr Lefroy:    Handled a gun before, have you, Tom?
04 Tom Lefroy:  Mmm
05 Lucy:              Tom! (scream)
(sound of gunshot)
06 Mr Lefroy:   Tom.
07 Tom Lefroy: Uncle?
08 Mr Lefroy:  Why not try a walk? There's some very fine country round about. Very fine.

One of the crucial factors that has a considerable impact on the strategic use of politeness strategies in the given conversation is social distance. As pointed out by Brown & Levinson (1987), politeness functions as an indicator of social distance between the hearer and the addressee. In other words, “the greater the social distance between the interlocutors (e.g., if they know each other very little), the more politeness is generally expected” (Partington (2006, p. 88).

As it can be seen in Mr Lefroy’s very first sentence, the protagonist resorts to bald-on-record strategy by performing an act of warning. According to Brown and Levinson, a warning ‘Careful!’ represents the case where “doing the FTA is primarily in H’s interest” and therefore, no face redress is necessary (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 98). Furthermore, the address forms used by the protagonists serve as markers of social distance and their personal relationship. As regards Tom Lefroy, he uses two forms of address when referring to the interlocutor, i.e. ‘Mr Lefroy’ and ‘uncle’. As Hellier points out, “people in the eighteenth century also addressed each another according to their relationship to one
another”. Apart from the familiar form of address, Tom Lefroy also uses respectful or formal form of address in conjunction with the surname. In relation to the Regency society, such addressing was appropriate when referring to gentry, flourishing middle-class people and to family members as well (Hellier, 2003).

In what follows, Mr Lefroy asks Tom if he has a previous knowledge or experience with gun handling. Mr Lefroy’s question is marked by ellipsis “Handled a gun before…”, which marks the utterance as being positively polite (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Moreover, the end of the sentence is marked by the contracted form of the nephew’s full name, i.e ‘Tom’. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), such shortened names serve as markers of positive politeness strategy, conveying in-group membership.

Last of all, Mr Lefroy persuades his nephew to take a walk instead of taking part in the shooting. Here, another sub-strategy of positive politeness occurs, i.e the sub-strategy of ‘giving (or asking) reasons’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987). As pointed out by both researchers, this strategy assumes cooperation, since “if there are no good reasons why H shouldn’t or can’t cooperate he will” (1987, p. 128). Therefore, indirect suggestions that include demanding reasons ‘why not?’ rank among “conventionalized positive-politeness forms in English” (ibid.).

In sum, the analysis has shown that the interactants in this dialogue tend to employ more positive than negative politeness strategies. This phenomenon can be explained by the role of social distance (D) in the choice of politeness forms. Since the interactants are family members, the social distance between them is low, what results in the preference for positive politeness and bald-on-record strategies.

**Dialogue 2:**

*Lady Gresham with her nephew Wisley pay a visit to Jane’s family in Hampshire. The main purpose of their visit is Wisley’s marriage proposal to Jane. However, Jane is not at home, since she goes for a walk with her second oldest brother George. Meanwhile, Mrs Austen has a brief conversation with Lady Gresham. Shortly afterwards, Wisley proposes marriage to Jane, but she tells him she cannot marry without love.*

**Scene 2 (43:05 – 43:30)**

01 Mrs Austen: So kind of you to return the call. Will you take a dish of tea, ma’am?
02 Lady Gresham: Green tea?
03 Mrs Austen: Brown, Your Ladyship.
04 Lady Gresham: Then no. Where is your youngest daughter?
05 Mrs Austen: She's visiting the poor, ma'am.

The scene depicts a brief conversation between the two women who do not share the same social class background. Jane’s mother represents a member of the middle class, whereas Lady Gresham belongs to the high society in Regency England. It might be said
that power distance is a central determinant of the protagonist’s language choice in the domain of politeness. With respect to the given dialogue, one can notice the presence of asymmetric exchange that can be used to infer a status relationship of the participants. As it can be seen, social status asymmetry is reflected in Mrs Austen’s using title-last-name that is used to show respect for socially superior position of Lady Gresham. In terms of Brown and Levinson’s theory, Mrs Austen employs the sub-strategy of ‘giving deference’, what ranks among negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). As opposed to Brown and Levinson’s theory, which argues that the purpose of the use of honorifics is to serve the hearer’s negative face wants, Matsumoto (1988) with a group of researchers perceive honorifics as the aspect of the discernment strategy. In this sense, the honorifics, such as ‘Your Ladyship’ or ‘ma’am’ would not be understood as a redress for an FTA; however, they would perform as the “relation-acknowledging devices” that are independent of the speaker’s rational intention” (Ide, 1989, p. 242). In addition, it can be noticed that Mrs Austen addresses the superior interlocutor more than once. On the contrary, Lady Gresham does not use any name or title to address Mrs Austen during the talk. This might be attributed to the fact that “high status individuals use less politeness [...]” than subordinates (Morand & Ocker, 2003, p. 7).

Furthermore, the social superiority of Lady Gresham can be also seen in her use of direct strategies to convey her wishes and desires. The protagonist refuses Mrs Austen’s offer of a brown tea, since she evidently prefers the green one. According to Brown and Levinson, refusal ranks among those acts that “threaten the positive-face want, by indicating that the speaker does not care about the addressee’s feelings, wants, etc.” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). As it can be seen, Lady Gresham uses neither positive nor negative strategies to refuse a dish of tea. Consequently, it might be stated that Lady Gresham has enough power to make a bald on-record speech act of refusal. In what follows, a wealthy aristocrat is curious to find out where is Mrs Austen’s daughter Jane. Without hesitancy Lady Gresham asks Jane’s mother a direct question, what only demonstrates that she is not curious about their family; however, she visits them only for the purpose of matchmaking. As it can be seen, Lady Gresham does not attempt to hide her inner intentions related to her matchmaking efforts and demonstrates them in a direct way. This can also be regarded as a face-threatening act towards the hearer, since Lady Gresham apparently demonstrates her indifference towards Mrs Austen’s feelings or wants.

The analysis has shown that power distance is an important variable and a central determinant of polite usage. It might be stated that the relationship between the interactants is asymmetrical in terms of social status, what results in the apparent preference for negative and bald on-record politeness strategies.

**Conclusion**

*The socio-pragmalinguistic analysis of the interaction of the movie characters has demonstrated the impact of sociocultural factors on the choice of politeness strategies. There are 2 main kinds of relationship between the interactants in this film: acquaintances*
and lovers. Consequently, the comparison between the use of positive and negative politeness can be seen from S-H relationship which is, to a great extent, influenced by a range of sociocultural aspects.

The analysis has discussed the interaction between the protagonists whose choice of politeness was mostly influenced by the great power difference. These interactants were categorized as ‘acquaintances’ occupying different social spheres. A strict social hierarchy played a crucial role in the Regency society, since it determined individuals’ position in the society. The way in which people communicated with one another served as a mirror which reflected their relative social positions. The analysis has shown that the less powerful participants used strategies of deference in speaking ‘upward’. The negative politeness strategies which were used by the subordinate interactants were most commonly expressed through the use of honorific forms. On the contrary, the more powerful interactant resorted to low numbered strategies, i.e. mainly bald-on-record strategies. As a consequence, the social class background of the participants turned out to be a crucial aspect in the interaction, since it presupposed a high power distance of the interactants. Consequently, power was recognized as a significant determinant of the linguistic realizations of politeness strategies.

In addition, the analysis indicated that the use of intimate or respectful forms of address was dependent on social distance, social power and the formality of context. The study of the private conversation between Jane and Lefroy indicated that the use of intimate terms of address is proportional to social distance and the formality of context. The interactant’s intimate relationship and informal setting had a crucial impact on their use of address forms.

The study further uncovered that between lovers positive politeness strategies were dominant over negative politeness strategies. The analysis of the interaction showed that the lovers were inclined to use positive politeness strategy 4 (Use in group identity markers), strategy 10 (Making promises) and bald-on-record strategies.

Bibliography:


