

# Politeness versus Manipulation

**Bianca BALABAN**

**George Bacovia University, Bacau, ROMANIA**

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, high technology and ultra performant devices have made space and place be no longer a problem. We can communicate easily, but can we communicate efficiently? How well can we achieve the purpose we have in communicating and which are the means used in order to do this?

Every human being follows his existential path in search for different accomplishments, which ultimately lead him to his great purpose: becoming God-like in kindness, nobility and holiness. However, the means used in order to achieve this purpose are as many as the number of individuals engaged in this play called life, and the steps to follow are none others than fulfilling his/her everyday normal tasks.

The present paper tries to determine whether the way in which we communicate is mostly purpose-oriented, and whether an "innocent" communication device as politeness can have a tricky use as manipulating the interlocutors in order to achieve our goals.

I have focused here mainly on the idea of "saving face" which means not being disrespectful to others in public, or taking preventive actions so that we will not appear to lose face in the eyes of others. According to Brown and Levinson<sup>1</sup>, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' "face.". Therefore the questions we should ask ourselves are we more polite when we want something, how useful can this method be and which are the techniques we use?

One of the greatest fears the modern human being faces is the one of being manipulated. Since there are so many means of communication and of exchanging information, the normal question the receiver asks himself is: am I being given the correct and objective data? How well-prepared are the people involved in the process of disseminating the pieces of information, and how professional are their methods? These are matters that will always make us wonder and feel suspicious.

However, being so engaged in this who-manipulates-whom carousel, we omit the fact that besides these obvious means of manipulation, there are some other ones to which we choose to carefully and deliberately assign other names, in order to allow ourselves to use them without any feeling of guilt or shame. One of them, and maybe the most popular, is the practical application of good manners or etiquette, or, better said: politeness.

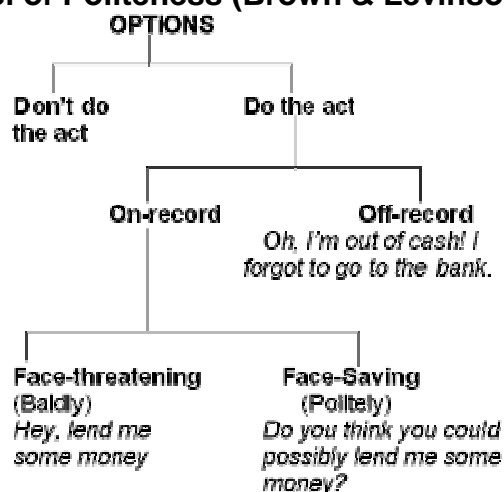
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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Penelope & Stephen Levinson (1987): *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

When Shakespeare hinted at the fact that we are all actors on the stage of life, he was “more right” than he probably meant it, since this attribute of ours – acting – is so common and so frequent among us.

Being social creatures, we inevitably interact with the others, since we need them in order to survive. Whether, we like admitting it or not, our actions, and implicitly our communicating efforts, are mostly purpose-oriented. We are always engaged in obtaining something, be it a simple opinion, an encouragement or even a material benefit. Thus, we organize our utterances and we choose our means according to the purpose we have. Cutting straight to the chase, the best way to illustrate this (our predilection for dramatising things in order to get what we want), here is the Model of Politeness given by two sociolinguists, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in 1978.

### A Model of Politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978)



Obviously, in order to get the money he needs, the speaker has got two main modalities: On-record and Off-record, the last one being linked to hinting at what he needs. Even if it seems the most delicate one, this method presents the risk of not being understood by the speaker. On the other hand, going for an On-record technique, the speaker gets to deal with two situations: one, where he would risk to lose not only the money, but also the friendly attitude of the receiver (*He! Lend me some money!*) and the other one, with which he is most likely to succeed: *Do you think you could possibly lend me some money?*

By analysing the model, we notice that Brown & Levinson introduced in their debate about politeness the notion of FACE (threatening / saving). From a sociolinguistic point of view, the concept of face refers to the respect that an individual has for him/herself, and maintaining that “self-esteem” in public or private situations. Usually, you try to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feels uncomfortable (as it happens in our example when asking them for money).

The concept of *face saving* is in itself tightly connected to politeness, and analysing the definitions it was given can only prove this, and also bring about the idea of manipulating through politeness. Thus, in a study performed by the University of Colorado, USA<sup>2</sup>, face saving is presented as a concept that refers to maintaining a good image, often in spite of adverse circumstances. It plays an important role in negotiation, in that one party may stick to its position in order to avoid looking bad. The success of the other side’s negotiator, the, may depend on finding a way to get what they want without making their rival look bad. This can involve simply the avoidance of gloating or bragging, or granting a minor concession. Of course, nobody can grant the fact that a person can occupy only one position in communication. Sometimes receivers, other times speakers, we are all aware

<sup>2</sup> International Online Training Program on Conflict, Conflict Research Consortium, Univ. of Colorado, USA

of the fact (or at least, we become aware afterwards) that we are being manipulate/ors/ed with this “sweet” technique of...politeness. Apparently, face saving could be translated – in the context that would best suit our purpose in the present paper – as nothing else than avoiding the truth when we know that it can be unpleasant for our interlocutor, and giving them what they like, as long as we know that this would bring us what we want.

We could even think that this is a very pervert act of the human mind, since, in order to “save” my “face” (avoid looking bad), I sell pretty lies to the other and get the benefits I want, and I do not risk upsetting him or losing his appreciation.

A problem that could occur with face-saving is that sometimes, people who are involved in a conflict and secretly know they are wrong will often not admit they made a mistake. They therefore will continue the conflict, for a simple reason as to avoid the embarrassment of looking bad.

Therefore, in order to avoid this problem, it is important to allow one’s opponents to make concessions gracefully, without having to admit that they made a mistake or backed down. Often, a simple change in our use of words or an exchange of concessions will help negotiators maintain a positive image, even when they are actually giving in very substantially.

Thus, we try to avoid embarrassing the other person, or making them feel uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTA’s) are acts that infringe on the hearer’s need to maintain his/her self esteem and be respected.<sup>3</sup>

Brown and Levinson say that “politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA’s” and they illustrate with the following example:

“What would you do if you saw a cup of pens on your teacher's desk, and you wanted to use one, would you?

say, "Ooh, I want to use one of those!"

say, "So, is it O.K. if I use one of those pens?"

say, "I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?"

Indirectly say, "Hmm, I sure could use a blue pen right now."

There are four types of politeness strategies, described by the two sociolinguists that sum up human "politeness" behavior: Bald On Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness, and Off-Record-indirect strategy.

If you answered **A**, you used what is called the **Bald On-Record** strategy which provides no effort to minimize threats to your teachers' "face."

If you answered **B**, you used the **Positive Politeness** strategy. In this situation you recognize that your teacher has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity.

If you answered **C**, you used the **Negative Politeness** strategy which similar to Positive Politeness in that you recognize that they want to be respected however, you also assume that you are in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..."

If you answered **D**, you used **Off-Record** indirect strategies. The main purpose is to take some of the pressure off of you. You are trying not to directly impose by asking for a pen. Instead you would rather it be offered to you once the teacher realizes you need one, and you are looking to find one. A great example of this strategy is something that almost everyone has done or will do when you have, on purpose, decided not to return someone's phone call, therefore you say, " I tried to call a hundred times, but there was never any answer."

Beside the strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson in order to achieve the peak of being polite – hence of manipulating the others in order to achieve our goals – the polite

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<sup>3</sup> <http://logos.uoregon.edu/explore/politeness.html>

manipulator (or the politeness manipulator) should mind that there is a politeness principle with conversational maxims similar to those formulated by Paul Grice.<sup>4</sup> Hence, Geoffrey Leech lists 6 maxims of politeness: tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. The first and the second form a pair, as do the third and the fourth. Note that these maxims vary from culture-to-culture, meaning, what may be considered as polite in one culture, may be strange or downright rude in another.

*The TACT maxim* states: "Minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other; maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to other". The first part of this maxim fits in with Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategy of minimizing the imposition, and the second part reflects the positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer's interests, wants and needs: "*Could I interrupt you for a second? If I could just clarify this then.*"

*The GENEROSITY maxim*: "Minimize the expression of benefit to self; maximize the expression of cost to self." Unlike the tact maxim, the maxim of generosity focuses on the speaker, and says that others should be put first instead of the self: "*You relax and let me do the dishes. You must come and have dinner with us.*"

*The APPROBATION maxim* states: "Minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of other". The operation principle of this maxim is rather obvious: all things being equal, we prefer to praise others and if we cannot do so, to sidestep the issue, to give some sort of minimal response (possible through the use of euphemisms or to remain silent. The first part of the maxim avoids disagreement; the second part intends to make other people feel good by showing solidarity. The reader of this paper should thus notice that both the speaker and his interlocutor are aware of the strategy that is so softly applied in order to obtain what we aim at. "*I heard you singing at the karaoke last night. It was, um...different*". For example, in this context, we avoid telling our friend that he didn't perform too well. However, knowing that he waits for our appreciation, and that giving him the truth would be too harsh, and we would even risk losing his friendship, the choice we have is giving him a polite lie, euphemising the answer.

*The MODESTY maxim* states: "Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self". A procedure that would seem quite difficult to apply by the less modest persons, the modesty maxim comes as a direct manner of bowing in front of the one who holds the gun, knowing that we might succeed in softening his decision. And, surprisingly, might work more often than we think. "*Oh, I'm so stupid – I didn't make a note of our lecture! Did you?*"

*The AGREEMENT maxim* runs as follows: "Minimize the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximize the expression of agreement between self and the other." This maxim is in line with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies of "seek agreement" and "avoid disagreement", to which they attach great importance. However, it is not being claimed that people totally avoid disagreement. It is

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<sup>4</sup> Grice's Conversational Maxims

**Maxim of Quantity:**

1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary.
2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary.

**Maxim of Quality:**

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Maxim of Relevance:**

Be relevant (i.e., say things related to the current topic of the conversation).

**Maxim of Manner:**

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness).
4. Be orderly.

simply observed that they are much more direct in expressing agreement, rather than disagreement. "A: *I don't want my daughter to do this; I want her to do that.*

B.: *Yes, but ma'am, I thought we resolved this already on your last visit.*"

The SYMPATHY maxim states: "minimize antipathy between self and the other; maximize sympathy between self and other." This includes a small group of speech acts such as congratulation, commiseration, and expressing condolences – all of which is in accordance with Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy of attending to the hearer's interests, wants, and needs.

"*I was sorry to hear about your father*".

From analysing the 6 maxims, one can easily draw a simple conclusion: the principle that governs them is basically the same: always make the other one feel more important than you, even if you are perfectly aware of the fact that there might be no reason in the world to do such a thing. However, we all do that, and what is more absurd is that we encourage the others to do it to us, when in the seat of the receiver. Moreover, we educate our children in the spirit of politeness, ignoring the fact that we actually teach them the secrets of manipulation: smile nicely and / so that you (shall) be smiled back; say hello & goodbye in order to make a good impression (and hence encourage the others to trust you with whatever might come up) and so on.

In conclusion, since we are the fathers of our own manipulators, and, even worse, we agree to "pay" in order to be manipulated via politeness, perhaps we have all accepted, consciously or not, the fact that, when wrapped in the appropriate glossy wrapping, even manipulation can become a thing of etiquette, and thus, be less painful.

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