

Verbal Politeness: When Discourse is subjected to Social Relations' Requirements

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Abstract:

Verbal communication is a conscious human act aimed at conveying intentions and achieving benefits. This isn't attainable for any speaker, if he adheres to the verbal politeness rules that elevate one from merely transmitting information to become a courteous speaker whose discourse conforms to the social relations' requirements. These relations significantly determine what we say. Consequently, linguistic interaction is necessarily a social interaction. So, I've dedicated this research paper to reveal the role of social relations in forming the ways of discourse, as well as shedding light on the various theories that have established principles governing this process.

Keywords: Discourse, verbal politeness, social relations, context.

Introduction:

It is not weird that our relationship with speech is stronger than all the anchor cables in the world, since "language is the activity of the human spirit and the apparatus for forming thoughts." It's also "man's eye directed towards existence, and the way through which he structures and constructs it." ii Language stores a creative power that generates its own being. Thus, the focus is not merely on what is said, but fundamentally on how it is said. The way of speaking, at its core, complies to the level of social relationship between the sender and the recipient; a relationship that imposes upon both parties the obligation to abide by social and cultural norms of speech, which are commonly referred to as principles of verbal etiquette or verbal politeness. To understand a spoken discourse, we must examine numerous factors related to social proximity and distance, since "our social relations determine much of what we say and a great deal of what we convey. Linguistic interaction is, by necessity, a social interaction." iii Thus, discourse becomes a reflection of the quality of social relations. Given the significance of this matter, it is evident that neglecting our social relationships' role in forming discourse often leads to misunderstanding. For this reason, this research paper aims to uncover the role of social relations in forming modes of discourse, as well as the various theories that have framed principles regulating communicative processes, according to a descriptive-analytical method.

Over the past three decades, the concept of "etiquette" or "politeness" and its nature has attracted special attention. Its definition, boundaries, and conceptualization remained topics of debate. Some scholars consider "politeness" as falling within the domain of pragmatics, while others consider it a socio-linguistic phenomenon. Holmes observes that "verbal politeness involves speaking to people in a manner appropriate to the relationship." iv Thus, for Holmes, the degree of politeness depends on the level of social relationship between interlocutors, which in turn determines the linguistic level used in conversation. Similarly, Verschueren follows Holmes's view, noting that politeness depends on

recognizing differences in power and degrees of social distance. He proposes that the measure of "politeness" in any society hinges on two factors:

- The assessment of the social relationship between interlocutors.
- Knowledge of the social and cultural values and norms of the given community.

For instance, the imperative sentence "Be quiet!" cannot be used when addressing an aged person or someone of a higher rank or a superior social status. The use of such expressions is likely to be considered impolite in any society.^v

Verschueren's perspective about politeness does not differ significantly from that of Taha AbdErrahman. For the latter, the speaker is "not an abstract entity for mere transmission, but one conditioned by politeness; indeed, the communicator does not attain the status of a true speaker unless he is polite." AbdErrahman further argues that the essence of speech is not merely "entering into a relationship with certain words, but entering into a relationship with the other. If speech entails a verbal relationship, it ought to be subordinate to the conversational relationship."^{vi}

This means that speech cannot exist independently of a conversational relationship upon which it is built. Such a relationship is fundamental, connecting sender and recipient, and constitutes one of the contextual elements influencing the formation of discourse structure through the sender's adoption of specific strategies. Shared knowledge is one of the outcomes of the conversational relationship and contributes to shaping the sender's prior assumptions. On the basis of shared knowledge and pre-existing assumptions, the sender selects his discursive mechanisms.

Taha AbdErrahman maintains that discourse is founded upon a set of self-evident assumptions according to which the sender chooses his discourse strategies. These assumptions are as follows:^{vii}

- A. The conversational assumption: This implies that no speech is meaningful unless it occurs between two parties, each occupying the position of speaker and listener respectively.
- B. The intentional assumption of discourse: This states that the sender does not utter speech without a purpose or objective to achieve.
- C. The assumption that the primary indication of the addressee's intention has a direct meaning.
- D. The assumption that natural language is the primary sign of discourse.

These assumptions function as criteria that regulate the selection of discursive mechanisms, styles, and plans. The sender must take them into account. These criteria can be outlined as follows:^{viii}

- A. The criterion of conversational relationship: A social criterion based on the degree of closeness or distance between the two parties in the discourse.
- B. The criterion of discourse form: A linguistic criterion concerning how the discourse indicates the sender's direct or indirect intention.
- C. The criterion of discourse purpose: Centered on the objective the discourse aims to achieve.

The importance of these criteria lies in grounding the relationship between discursive styles and the contextual parameters of communication, as well as the interaction between sender and recipient and the sender's relationship to his own discourse. This ultimately reveals the mechanisms contained within discourse to varying degrees, as dictated by contextual circumstances and the sender's need to employ some mechanisms over others.

The sender seeks to establish a relationship with the recipient if it does not already exist; in such cases, this becomes the primary aim of the discourse. Here, the interactive function of language becomes evident, for "the semantic values of discourse are a possible and significant entry point for determining the network of social relations, since engaging with a language that is engaging with its meanings."ix The pre-existing relationship between the two parties in discourse is built upon two axes:

A. The horizontal relationship axis: This is based on a set of characteristics:

- Religious affiliation: Muslim–Christian.
- Gender: male–female).
- Age: young–old–elderly.
- Profession: teacher–student.
- Ethnicity: Arab–Chinese.
- Nationality: Saudi–Syrian–Gulf.
- Marital status: single–married.x

Affective relationships fall under this category, such as relationships of closeness or distance, affection or estrangement.

B. The vertical relationship axis: This manifests in hierarchical levels within society, where each party in the discourse occupies a specific rank. The sender and the recipient must know each other's relative position, whether socially or professionally close or distant. The horizontal and vertical axes complement each other in constructing conversational strategies. The existence of a horizontal relationship between the two parties does not negate its inclusion within a hierarchical or a vertical structure. "Language reflects certain types of vertical relationships at the syntactic level, such as imperative and prohibitive forms, as well as at the phonetic level through the use of rising intonation when uttering speech. Thus, these syntactic forms bear a distinctive feature known as the 'deixis marker,' in that linguistic structure mirrors the relational distance between the two parties in discourse."xi

Numerous studies, both classical and modern, have sought to reveal the role of conversational relationships in shaping discourse. Modern studies, in particular, have identified a set of rules termed "rules of address to regulate speech production", according to the sender and recipient relationship requirements.

1. Rules of Address:

Discursive styles and strategies vary according to the nature of the sender and the recipient relationship. Politeness in discourse represents one of the phenomena that the sender considers to varying degrees when producing speech. "Polite utterances symbolize the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Specifically, we might expect someone we do not know well to ask us: May I borrow your book? Whereas another person, like an elder brother, might phrase it directly: Give me the book.

If we fail to recognize the nature of our relationship with these individuals who addressed us in these ways, the strategies they employed will likely disturb us, because these strategies reflect how they perceive our relationship."xii

Lakoff attributed a significant role to politeness in shaping discourse, while Leech positioned it as foundational to speech production. Brown and Levinson attempted to universalize it. Whereas, Grice's principle of cooperation serves as a point of convergence among these various studies.

1.1. The Principle of Cooperation

Grice's principle of cooperation is based on the fundamental maxim: "Make your conversational contribution as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the exchange."xiii This principle includes a set of rules enabling the sender to convey his intention in a way that ensures the recipient's ability to understand and interpret it, thereby ensuring successful conversation. Grice's assumption holds that "the listener relies on this cooperation to make non-demonstrative inferences. If a speaker's behavior in communication is cooperative, it is so for a fundamental reason: it results from rational behavior."xiv

This principle is built upon four maximsxv:

* The Maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as required, but not more or less than needed. This further subdivides into:

- Provide as much information as the listener needs.
- Do not provide more information than required.

* The Maxim of Quality: This aims to prevent the speaker from asserting falsehood or claiming unverified truths. It requires the speaker to utter only what he has evidence to confirm as true. It includes:

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

* The Maxim of Relevance: This prevents the speaker from digressing into unrelated intentions. It requires that the speaker's contribution be relevant to the ongoing topic of conversation.

* The Maxim of Manner: This aims to avoid ambiguity, boredom, and excessive brevity. It stipulates that the speaker should:

- Be clear.
- Be precise and avoid obscurity.
- Be concise.
- Be orderly.

Grice focused on explaining the phenomenon of conversational implicature through these maxims, emphasizing the necessity of adhering to cooperative rules to understand such implicatures. However, he neglected to formulate rules governing ethical conduct between interlocutors. Thus, the principle of cooperation remains confined to literal meaning, failing to extend to other meanings influenced by contextual considerations such as ethical treatment and respect for the interlocutors' status—factors that often lead to the violation of this principle through the use of polite language and the formulation of diverse discursive strategies. Indeed, social relations determine much of what is said and a great deal of what is conveyed; linguistic interaction is fundamentally social interaction.

2.1. The Principle of Politeness

Robin Lakoff established this principle in her work **The Logic of Politeness**, calling for the necessity of "considering the conversational content of speech acts when judging the acceptability of sentences,

just as we have traditionally valued syntactic structure and currently value semantic content."xvi Limiting analysis to linguistic form without regard for the context of communication—including logical and pragmatic assumptions—fails to yield a comprehensive interpretation of certain linguistic structures.

This is evident in discourses grounded in the relationship between interlocutors, which may take linguistic forms shaped by the nature of this relationship. Consider the following example:

"Please close the door."

This implies that the speaker is of equal or lower status than the addressee, and there is no intimate relationship between them. In this context, the word "please" may mean:

"Since I cannot compel you to close the door, I am requesting your assistance."

However, if the speaker holds higher status, conventional usage dictates that "please" actually means:

"Out of decency and politeness, I request that you do this, even though I have the authority to compel you."

The difference is clear: in the first context, the addressee may refuse the request; in the second, refusal would require a strong justification.

Thus, Lakoff proposed two interdependent rules, which she termed "rules of conversational competence", to expand the scope of general linguistic principles and assess the quality of discourse. She formulated them as followsxvii:

- Be clear.
- Be polite.

Lakoff derived three rules from this principle, naming them "rules of verbal politeness", which guide the speaker's utterancesxviii:

- The Rule of Deference: Avoid imposing oneself on the addressee; in other words, be reserved and refrain from interfering in others' affairs.
- The Rule of Autonomy: Do not force the addressee to make decisions; leave his choices open.
- The Rule of Solidarity: Show friendliness toward the addressee; be amicable.

According to Lakoff, the principle of cooperation relates to the principle of politeness in two ways:

- Agreement: The rule of deference aligns with cooperation, as the speaker produces formal discourse, avoiding intrusion or embarrassment, thus subsuming the principle of cooperation under the rule of deference.
- Conflict: When discourse is shaped by the rules of autonomy and solidarity, it may violate the principle of cooperation, which constitutes the point of divergence.

* The Principle of "Face":

"Face" is a symbolic representation of the speaker during utterance. Brown and Levinson, in their work *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena*, established general rules to regulate politeness between sender and recipient. This principle can be formulated as: "Save the face of others."

It is based on two componentsxix:

- * Social value of face: Mutual respect and cooperation between sender and recipient require that each preserve the other's "face", which represents fundamental human desires. This principle divides into two aspectsxxx:
 - Negative Face: The desire not to be impeded or imposed upon by others.

- Positive Face: The desire for one's will and self-image to be appreciated and approved by others.

* Degree of Face Threat: To ensure mutual respect, researchers classified speech acts that threaten face, particularly those conflicting with the addressee's will. These include expressions of envy, negative emotions, indifference to others' feelings, disapproval, criticism, and ridicule.

2.3. The Principle of Maximum Politeness:

To address the limitations of the principle of cooperation, which is based on linguistic grounds and confined to the link between speaker intention and semantic meaning, Leech formulated a complementary principle grounded in socio-pragmatic and psychological rules. This principle extends beyond regulating relations to fostering friendships, thus forming a foundation for cooperation. This Principle aims at preserving social bonds within society.

Leech classified linguistic acts according to their illocutionary function and their relation to the primary objective of discourse: "building and maintaining social relationships." He did so by invoking the principle of politeness during the performance of illocutionary acts, categorizing them into four hierarchical levels:xxi

- Competitive Acts: Speech acts in which the speaker invokes politeness to achieve the illocutionary objective by using linguistic devices that soften the force of commands or questions, such as: "Please", "If you don't mind."

- Convivial Acts: Acts in which politeness serves as both basis and motivation, where illocutionary and social objectives coincide, such as invitations and expressions of gratitude.

- Collaborative Acts: Acts in which the social objective (i.e., politeness) is absent from the illocutionary function; the act's objective is unaffected by social considerations, such as conveying instructions.

- Conflictive Acts: Acts whose illocutionary function requires the absence of politeness, as its presence would contradict the speaker's intent—such as mockery, belittlement, or threats. For example, one would not say: "Please, I beg you to let me hit you."

Adherence to the core objective of the principle of maximum politeness may lead to violations of the cooperative principle, which demands direct expression of intent for effective communication. This is illustrated in the following example:

"One person noticed that his neighbor's car parked in front of his house. He said: May God bless the persons of this neighborhood; streets are narrow and parking spaces are scarce.

Neighbor: I hope you don't mind; I'll look for another parking place.

Person: Don't move it right now; I didn't mean that.

Neighbor: Even if you did, you're right.

It is evident that the person is polite in addressing his neighbor, employing an indirect strategy to imply his request to move the car. Politeness here underpins cooperation and respects neighborly relations, prompting the person to excuse his neighbor by citing narrow streets and scarce parking. His statement, 'Don't move it right now,' further illustrates this indirectness.

2.4. The Principle of Friendship and Consideration of Sincerity and Loyalty:

This pragmatic principle arises from the depth of the Arab-Islamic heritage and takes various forms, such as "alignment of speech with action" and "congruence of conduct with speech." It can be formulated as:

- Do not utter words that your actions do not confirm: this principle rests on two elements: "One is speech transmission, relating to what we call the communicative aspect of address. The other is 'speech implementation,' relating to what we call it ethical aspect."xxii

2.4.1. Rules of Communication Derived from the Principle of Sincerity:

A set of rules derived from the principle of sincerity were compiled and articulated by Al-Mawardi in his work (The Etiquette of Life and Religion):xxiii

- Speech should have a purpose, either to achieve benefit or to avert harm.
- Speech should be timely and seize the appropriate opportunity.
- Speech should be limited to what is necessary.
- A person must carefully choose his-her words.

In this context, Taha Abd Errahman emphasizes that these rules encompass the principle of cooperation and its associated maxims, prominent among modern scholars for regulating the communicative aspect, except for the maxim of quality ("truthfulness"), which corresponds to the fourth rule.

The first rule corresponds to the principle of cooperation, requiring a defined purpose for communication.

The second rule aligns with the maxim of relationship, requiring context-appropriate speech.

The third rule parallels the maxim of quantity, advocating sufficiency without excess.

The fourth rule corresponds to the maxim of manner, requiring clarity, precision, and proper linguistic form.

2.4.2. Rules of Interaction Derived from the Principle of Sincerity:

The principle of sincerity, in its ethical dimension, is divided into "a set of principles consolidated by Dr. Taha Abd Errahman from the Arab-Islamic heritage and reformulated according to rules of address. Each principle yields two rules."xxiv:

- The Rule of Intention: Ensure your intention is sincere in every statement you make to others.
- The Rule of Truthfulness: Be truthful in what you convey to others.
- The Rule of Sincerity: When showing friendliness, be free from personal motives.

Dr. Taha Abd Errahman notes that these interaction rules derived from the principle of sincerity encompass the established rules of politeness and address, while avoiding the shortcomings inherent in those principles.

The presentation of these Arab and Western principles demonstrates the importance of framing communicative acts according to the relationship between interlocutors (sender and recipient), as they are the very foundation of such interaction. This involves regulating speakers' utterances through rules that define their informative and communicative utility, known as rules of communication, as well as attempting to regulate these acts through rules that define their ethical politeness. The degree to which these rules manifest in discourse depends on the degree of closeness or distance between interlocutors.

If we assume that the relationship between sender and recipient is formal, and the degree of closeness is low, the dominant rules would be those of the "principle of cooperation" and the "principle of sincerity" in Arab tradition. In such cases, interlocutors tend toward directness and adherence to the topic matter, as their focus is less on building or maintaining intimacy and more on the communicative aspect.

Conversely, if the relationship is intimate, the prevailing rules are those of the "principle of politeness" or, as Taha Abd Errahman terms them, "rules of interaction." Here, the interlocutors' concern for maintaining or establishing the relationship leads them toward indirectness, allowing broader space for self-expression.

Conclusion:

This research paper has addressed the topic of verbal politeness, a topic of ongoing discussion in various disciplines such as pragmatics and sociology. When formulating discourse, speakers adhere to this principle according to the social distance between themselves and their interlocutors. Our study has concluded with the following findings:

- Verbal politeness can be considered a fixed principle within a given social culture, deriving its existence from the social, linguistic, and religious norms of that linguistic community.
- Politeness underlies the selection of linguistic options according to our social relations' requirements.
- Verbal politeness influences not only how something is said but also how others interpret it.
- To understand spoken discourse, one must examine multiple factors related to social distance ("closeness" or "distance"), some of which exist prior to verbal interaction; external factors such as the relative status of participants according to social values tied to age, authority, etc.
- The ultimate aim of discourse is to achieve benefits and objectives, which cannot be realized unless both interlocutors respect each other's status. Therefore, adherence to principles of politeness is essential to building or maintaining strong social relationships. Given the importance of this topic, we recommend incorporating it into university curricula and organizing conferences and seminars to consolidate the idea that "Verbal politeness is a right given to all, and the word is an art meticulously crafted" among students.

Endnotes:

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^{iv}Susanne Faisal Samer, *Verbal politeness: A Socio-Pragmatic Study*, Journal of Languages' Faculties, Baghdad, Iraq, vol. 28, 2014, p. 5.

^vIbid., p. n

^{vi}Taha AbdErrahman, *Tongue and Balance*, The Arab Cultural Center, 1st ed., Casablanca, 1998, p. 97.

^{vii}Ibid., p. 98.

^{viii}Abd Al-Hadi bin Dhafar Al-Shahri, *Discourse Strategies: A Linguistic-Pragmatic Approach*, The United New Book Publishing House, 1st ed., 2004, p. 87.

^{ix}See *ibid.*, p. 88.

^x*Ibid.*, p. 89.

^{xi}*Ibid.*, p. 90.

^{xii}*Ibid.*, p. 91

^{xiii}Taha Abd Errahman, *Tongue and Balance*, p. 238.

^{xiv}Nour Eddin Jait, *Pragmatics of Political Discourse*, Modern World of Books, 1st ed., Jordan, 2012, p. 76.

^{xv}Mahmoud Ahmad Nahla, *New Horizons in Linguistic Research*, New knowledge Publishing House, Egypt, p. 34; see also Al-AyyashiAdrawi, *Conversational Implicature in Linguistic Pragmatics*, Al-Aman Publishing House, 1st ed., Rabat, Morocco, 2011, pp. 99–100.

^{xvi}Taha Abd Errahman, *Tongue and Balance*, p. 240.

^{xvii}See *ibid.*, p. 241.

^{xviii}See *ibid.*, p. 241.

^{xix}*Ibid.*, p. 243

^{xx}*Ibid.*, p. 246.

^{xxi}See Abd Al-Hadi Ben Dhafar Al-Shahri, *Discourse Strategies*, p. 111.

^{xxii}Taha Abd Errahman, *Tongue and Balance*, p. 249.

^{xxiii}Al-Mawardi, *The Etiquette of Life and Religion*, ed. Dr. Muhammad Al-Sabāh, Life Library Publications, 2nd ed., Beirut, Lebanon, 1986, p. 275.

^{xxiv}Taha Abd Errahman, *Tongue and Balance*, p. 250.