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Applying Brown and Levinson´s politeness theory to Shakespeare's comedies

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations

FTA	face-threatening act
S	speaker
H	hearer
P	power
D	distance
Rx	rating of imposition
Wx	seriousness (weightiness) of FTA x

1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to analyse four historical texts with the help of the parameters of politeness provided by Brown and Levinson (1978) along the lines proposed by Brown and Gilman (1989). Shakespeare´s four comedies *Much Ado about Nothing, Measure for Measure, The Taming of the Shrew,* and *Twelfth Night* were chosen in contrast with Brown and Gilman´s treatment of four major tragedies *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*. It was hoped to see whether the comedy setting would yield different results than the tragedy genre. Because of the limited time space, it was not possible to analyse all the comedies. However, the four comedies chosen represent a wide range of Shakespeare´s comic oeuvre, ranging from the early `light-hearted´ *The Taming of the Shrew* (around 1590, cf. Thompson 1984, 3) through the `mature´ *Twelfth Night* to the more `sombre´ *Much Ado about Nothing* and the `problem play´ *Measure for Measure,* which has given rise to a debate on its genre classification, the term `problem play´ deriving from the fact that there are "plays which critics and performers have found difficult to classify under the standard genres of comedy, history, and tragedy [...]. The `problem plays´ occur when the values of tragedy are applied to the problems of comedy" (Fox 1988, 146-47). It will therefore be interesting to see whether the treatment of the variables power, rank, and distance in *Measure for Measure* rather tends towards tragedy or comedy.

The Brown and Levinson model offers a tool to describe the quality of social relationships; thus, it can serve as a discourse framework, for instance, in the analysis of literary dialogue since it enables the analyst to explore, in a systematic way, the relation between language use and the social relationships between the speakers. This is what Roger Brown and Albert Gilman did in their article "Politeness theory and Shakespeare´s tragedies". They used drama as their

`data set´ to test the applicability of Brown and Levinson´s theory to Early Modern English because plays reflect the colloquial spoken language of the time. Moreover, the `psychological soliloquies´ in drama provide access to the inner life of the speakers.

The first introductory chapter will provide a description of the major components of Brown and Levinson´s theory of politeness. First, some of the important work by Brown and Levinson will be summarised, relevant terms and categories from their model will be introduced, and the different sort of strategies speakers may use in a variety of verbal acts will be outlined, ranging from commands and complaints to compliments and offers. It will also be explained how the choice of a particular strategy - polite or impolite - is constrained by important contextual factors relating to both speaker and hearer. They include the interactants´ relative power (P), their relative social distance (D), and the ranked extremity (R) of the `face-threatening act´, i.e. an act which `intrinsically´ threatens face. The ranked extremity refers to the precise nature of the imposition being made and will form an important constraint: the greater the imposition, the greater the use of politeness.

After giving an outline of the components of the Brown/Levinson model, the Brown/Gilman version of it will be presented, which aims at reducing the number of strategies governing politeness behaviour. Brown and Gilman´s procedure will be demonstrated in their application of the modified version to Shakespeare´s four major tragedies, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello,* by a systematic search for minimal pairs where the dimensions of contrast are power (P), distance (D), and the `intrinsic´ extremity (R) of the `face-threatening act´. Brown and Gilman put forward a system of scoring, which ranges from -1 to +2, depending on the degree of politeness of a character´s linguistic behaviour. After

dealing with the scoring of deference, it will be shown why some `face-threatening acts´ do not lend themselves to be integrated in the scoring system. The second chapter will end with a section summarising the outcomes of Brown and Gilman´s application of Brown and Levinson´s modified model to the four tragedies.

The third chapter, which forms the core of this study, consists of a detailed analysis of 80 minimal pairs, each containing two passages which form a contrast of politeness. The entry forms in the third chapter refer to the appendix where the passages to be analysed are listed. Parentheses immediately after the speech headings identify material not in the original but added as a contextual aid (cf. Brown and Gilman 1989, 208, n: 2). Likewise, brackets take the place of footnotes from the cited edition to clarify terms and constructions relevant to the politeness level of a speech (Ibid., n: 3). The analysis of the three variables is arranged as follows: (1) power (P), (2) rank (R), and (3) distance (D). For ease of exposition, each section is preceded by a table providing the numbers of minimal pairs to be discussed, and the totals are arranged in a descending order. Within the three groups, contrasts congruent with the theory will precede the ones which are incongruent. In analysing the three variables, the succession of the four comedies will be as follows: *Much Ado about Nothing, Measure for Measure, The Taming of the Shrew,* and *Twelfth Night.* The edition quoted from is *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*: *Much Ado about Nothing* (Mares 1988), *Measure for Measure* (Gibbons 1991), *The Taming of the Shrew* (Thompson 1984), and *Twelfth Night* (Donno 1985). The conclusion will mainly compare my results concerning the application of Brown and Levinson´s politeness theory to the four comedies with Brown and Gilman´s outcomes regarding the four tragedies.

2 The Brown and Levinson model: some central concepts

2.1 Face

2.1.1 Face-work

`Face´ is something that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced. "Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants [...]. The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967, 5). It is generally in every participant´s interest to maintain each others´ `face´: "The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of the considerateness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of other participants" (ibid.). The actions by means of which people cooperate in maintaining face are called `face-work´.

2.1.2 Positive and negative face

Brown and Levinson´s description of polite interaction goes hand in hand with Goffman´s conception of `face´[1]. They assume that `face´ consists of two related aspects, called positive and negative `face´. `Positive face´ refers to the positive consistent `self-image´ or personality claimed by interactants, including the desire that others appreciate and approve of this image. `Negative face´, on the other hand, refers to any speaker´s right not to be imposed upon and the right to be independent of the social world. The two components of `face´ may be condensed as follows:

[1] The notions and labels for positive and negative face derive ultimately from Durkheim´s "positive and negative rites" (in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1915), partially via Goffman (cf. Brown and Levinson 1989, 285, n: 8).

> "negative face: the want of every `competent adult member´ that his actions be unimpeded by others. Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 62).

2.1.3 Face-threatening acts

Brown and Levinson argue that the most commonplace speech acts negotiated in everyday conversation, such as advising, promising, inviting, requesting, ordering, criticising, even complementing, carry an element of risk, for they threaten the "public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself" (1987, 61). It is thus clear that there are acts that do not satisfy the `face wants´ of the addressee and/or the speaker. For instance, asking someone for the loan of his or her car, or requesting some similar service is clearly an imposition on that person. Such requests threaten the `negative face´ of the addressee, encroaching on his or her desire to be free from imposition. Other acts, such as the use of insults and terms of abuse, pose a different threat. Calling someone a `silly ass´ clearly demonstrates an unfavourable evaluation of the hearer´s `public self-image´ and can thus be regarded as a threat to the latter´s `positive face´. Acts which threaten either the positive or the negative `face´ of the addressee are called `face-threatening acts´ (hereafter abbreviated to FTAs).

2.2 Strategies for carrying face-threatening acts

It goes without saying that speakers who want to reach their aims cannot do without FTAs. Politeness, as Brown and Levinson define it, consists of a set of strategies that serve to minimise the risks to `face´ or `self-esteem´ whenever a speaker commits a `face-threatening act´. Their argument is that politeness strategies follow from the human ability to reason and find means to achieve one´s ends. The question is how to perform the FTAs. There are various ways,

depending on the context of interaction, the social relationship of the speakers and the amount of imposition which the FTA entails. To carry out an FTA, a speaker may select one of the four following strategies. They are ordered here from most to least threatening.

2.2.1 Bald on-record

`Bald on-record´ conforms with Grice´s Maxims. Grice (1975) claims that people entering into conversation with each other tacitly agree to co-operate towards mutual communicative ends. He calls these conventions maxims and suggests that at least the following four obtain:

> Maxim of quality: Be non-spurious (speak the truth, be sincere)
> Maxim of quantity:
> (a) Don´t say less than is required
> (b) Don´t say more than is required
> Maxim of Relevance: Be relevant
> Maxim of manner: Avoid ambiguity and obscurity
> (Brown and Levinson 1987, 95)

These maxims fall under the so-called `cooperative principle´, i.e. "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975, 67). Whenever speakers want to do FTAs with maximum efficiency, they will choose the strategy `bald on-record´. In such a case, the communicative intention that led a certain actor to do a certain act is clear. During an operation, for instance, utterances like `help!´, `watch out´, etc. are used totally without redress, as this would decrease the urgency that is being communicated.

2.2.2 Positive and negative politeness

`Positive politeness´ asserts identification between participants and is meant to meet `positive face´ needs (cf. Brown/Gilman 1987, 162). The phrase `have a good day´ is an example of `positive politeness´; the speaker wishes for the hearer what the hearer wishes for himself. The verbal repertoire involved here is like the verbal behaviour between friends: "make A feel good - be friendly" (Lakoff 1973, 298). This strategy is understood as a strategy of intimacy.

"Negative politeness is defined as any attempt to meet negative face wants" (Brown/Gilman 1987, 162). Unlike `positive politeness´ it increases social distance. For instance, someone might be requested to close a door in the following way: `would you mind closing the door ?´. By choosing to perform the FTA with redressive action, the speaker gives redress to the hearer´s desire for self-determination and freedom from imposition. As the above example redresses the hearer´s `negative face´, it can be said to be an instance of negative politeness.

The terms `positive politeness´ and `negative politeness´ are confusing, i.e. the first one seems to have a positive connotation and the second a negative one. That is why other authors (cf. Scollon and Scollon 1983, 166-8) prefer `deference politeness´ for `negative politeness´ and `solidarity politeness´ for `positive politeness´. They argue that deference is the essence of `negative politeness´, and they maintain that by choosing the term `solidarity´ the emphasis on the `common grounds´ of the relation of the participants is more evident. However, `positive politeness´ and `negative politeness´ are used throughout in this study because of the adoption of the Brown/Levinson model.

2.2.3 Off-record

`Off-record´ utterances are indirect uses of language whose precise meaning has to be interpreted. A number of off-record strategies may lead to the violation of Grice´s conversational maxims:

a. The Maxim of Relevance is violated if a speaker says something that is not explicitly relevant. The utterance `this soup is a bit bland´ implies `pass the salt´ and violates the Relevance Maxim (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987, 215).

b. Being indirect, a speaker inevitably violates the Maxim of Quantity . This may be done by exaggerating, : `I tried to call a hundred times, but there was never any answer´ (ibid., 219).

c. The violation of the Maxim of Quality is reflected, for instance, in figures of speech, such as irony and metaphor, which lead the hearer to find some implicature[2] for the intended message. By being ironic a speaker can convey his meaning indirectly, cf. `beautiful weather, isn´t it! (to postman drenched in rainstorm)´ (ibid., 222).

d. By being vague or ambiguous, a speaker violates the Maxim of Manner or Modality and invites no particular implicatures. Ambiguities produce vagueness and thus minimise the threats. "`John´s a pretty sharp/smooth cookie´ could be either a compliment or an insult, depending on which of the connotations of *sharp* or *smooth* are latched on to" (ibid., 225).

As the above examples show, the `off-record´ strategies go beyond `negative politeness´ because they imply a higher degree of indirectness.

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[2] Grice coined the term `implicature´ for indirect, context-determined meaning (cf. Short 1989, 150).