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STABILITY AND METALINGUISTIC JUDGMENTS. THE CASE OF LINGUISTIC POLITENESS*

If metalinguistic awareness were an epiphenomenon we should not bother about the quality of judgments stemming from it. But if we assume the opposite view we need to find the evidence that the user's reflection on language at least does not collide with the real rules that govern speech. The present study takes a closer look at stylistic awareness. Its main goal is to determine whether politeness formulas are used as a coherent hierarchical system. One hundred psychology majors participated in the experiment, half women and half men (mean age= 21;6). Nine polite formulas (requests) most frequently used in everyday Polish were employed in the experiment. Participants were asked to judge the politeness of requests presented in pairs. Three trials were performed at one week intervals. The results indicated that the subjects' hierarchy of requests was coherent and stable over time. The participants judged politeness of the presented formulas in a very similar way during each trial.

Introduction

The most nagging controversy over metalinguistic awareness to date has been that of its ontological status. More specifically, at the first stage of research, from the mid seventies till the late eighties, scholars working in the field were trying to determine whether reflection on language was a part of language itself or just an epiphenomenon (for a discussion see: Kwarciak, 1990, and Kwarciak, 1992).

Today there is a general consensus that metalinguistic awareness is not a kind of an echo or a "parasitic" cognitive process. A growing body of evidence shows that it provides both child and adult with the ultimate ability to monitor and control use of language. The first researcher to find substantial empirical support for this belief was K.G. Böhme. According to her data, metalinguistic awareness is a much better predictor of language development than factors such as syntactic skills (for details see Böhme, 1983).

The above position apparently predominates among researchers working on the issue. Unfortunately, this is not a complete solution because it overlooks an important difficulty. If

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metalinguistic awareness were an epiphenomenon we should not bother – so to speak – about the quality of the judgments stemming from it. In such a case the language user could formulate even the most erronous semantic or syntactic rule because they would not influence language uses. However, if we assume the opposite view, we need to establish the evidence that the user's reflection on language does not collide with the real rules that govern speech. What is more, if we claim that metalinguistic awareness improves language acquisition and functioning we must provide much more specific evidence of the compatibility of the two systems - language and metalinguistic awareness.In fact, if reflection on language is part and parcel of speech it must be fine-tuned to the whole system. Otherwise it could have a devastating influence on language functioning despite the assumption of the opposite.

The need for such evidence depends on language level, however. Even those who assume that metalinguistic awareness is a kind of mental booster agree that this idea does not apply at the lower levels of language. Apparently, people have no direct cognitive access to the phonological level. The process of generation of a phoneme is quick, automatic and must be resistant to outside interference. Our awareness of the phonological level of language seems to be extremely restricted. It seems obvious from our everyday experience that we can neither monitor this process nor make any substantial changes in it. For example, the average person is totally unaware of producing distinctive features, nor can he or she make any adjustments in speech as concerns such features. Indeed, it would be hard to find the proper way of adjusting those basic settings.

The situation changes dramatically at the higher levels. Although grammatical structures seem to "take care" of themselves, in some cases language users must choose between grammatical and ungrammatical forms. He or she is even more metalinguistically engaged while the decision concerns whether or not a sign (word, sentence or text) conveys the intended meaning. The most challenging for the user is the stylistic level of language. In this case the act of speech must conform to numerous external rules. Consequently, speaking in the social context (which occurs almost always) requires the constant support of metalingusitic awareness. As Aiello and Levi (1988) put it, it is based on implicit metacognitive acts in contrast to, say, grammatical awareness of language that emerges only when a difficulty arises. It is thus based on explicit metacognitive acts (or activated by an external difficulty in information processing).   The issue has been summarized in Table 1.

To sum up, it is not enough only to describe metalinguistic reflection and abilities. To amass adequate empirical support for the thesis that metalinguistic awareness is a part of language, or even its hard core, one must prove that metalinguistic judgments made by an average person in a typical situation not only do not disrupt acts of speech, but to the contrary buttress them by providing the speaker with adequate instructions to monitor and control speech. This issue has been brought forward by scholars working in the field.

To make matters more difficult, at present it is extremely hard to find the following evidence:

1. The speaker does not formulate any metalinguistic judgements that could cause fatal errors in language processing.

2. The speaker formulates metalinguistic judgments that optimize language acquisition and processing.

3. The speaker controls his/ her language metalinguistically with no formal instruction.

Even Condition 1 — which is the weakest one — requires knowledge that we have not collected so far. Despite Noam Chomsky's efforts, it is still impossible even to tell a gram-

Table 1. The areas of MA and types of metalinguistic judgements. Based on Aiello & Levi (1988)

Level	Access	Influence	Metacognition type
Phonological	None	none	explicit
Syntactic	Restricted	small	explicit
Semantic	Extensive	big	implicit
Stylistic	Full	full	implicit

matical utterance from an ungrammatical one without any doubt. Generative-transformational grammar does not provide well-defined criteria needed to make such a distinction. Condition 2 puts much greater demands on the researcher. As of now there is no theory of optimal language processing. Condition 3 poses the greatest difficulty in terms of empirical research. Research on metalinguistic control over language is just emerging.

Fortunately, despite numerous gaps in our knowledge, interesting tests of the consistency of language use and reflection on it can be performed. One facet of the issue in question seems easy to examine: the consistency of metalinguistic stylistic judgments. This may prove to be a small step forward. The present study was designed to investigate this issue using linguistic politeness as an example. In other words, a closer look was taken at the appropriate use of stylistic awareness.

Linguistic politeness (LP) as a speech register

This study proposes the following approach to linguistic politeness:

1. The polite register is regarded as a hierarchical system whose elements must be properly matched with critical situational variables.

2. It is assumed that the proper use of linguistic politeness requires the speaker's sensitivity to the combination of social factors which determine how polite one should or can be in a given situation, and consequently, govern the choice of linguistic devices. To test this hypothesis, the study seeks to control three key elements of the situation and their combination: listener's status, the probability of reaching the goal, and listener's attitude. The two latter represent a new category of temporary or here-and-now variables. They were used in the experimental part of the study, being much easier to perceive than fixed variables such as listener's power or obligations.

3. Finally, this study rejects two tacit assumptions underlying the existing studies. According to the first, the degree of linguistic politeness is proportional to the indirectness of utterances. A study by Blum-Kulka (1987) suggests that the relationship is more complex. The second rejected assumption is that maximum LP is always appropriate. This assumption, which is more general than the first, seems to govern the existing studies since they do not seem to accept the use of imperatives in any situation as an element of correct application of linguistic politeness. We, on the contrary, argue that everything depends on context. If a child does not use polite linguistic markers in his/her request when, for example, the addressee is expected to comply with this request, and does not object to it, the child is more polite than he/she would be using such markers, thereby violating Grice's principle of maximum efficiency in communication. The inappropriate use of LP may make an utterance

sound like irony (Ervin-Tripp, 1977; Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977), a joke, or an indication of an unusual social context. For instance, a child using a complex polite form at mealtime in a request for seconds made to a parent will be interpreted as making a joke within the family context. For a stranger, this unusual application of the polite register may indicate some abuse (the child is not given enough food so he/she has to beg for it).

Defining LP

The studies by Brown and Levinson (1978), Garvey (1975), Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1985) as well as progress in the research on communicative competence have helped to understand that conventional linguistic politeness is only a small part of polite speech. As stated earlier, practically all elements of speech acts, including paralinguistic features, utterances that introduce, justify and modify requests, and such features of conversation as choosing a topic or turn-taking, contribute, or may contribute, to the courteous use of language.

Measurement of LP

Experimental implementation of the new findings requires some reconceptualizations. Especially, complicated systems of classifications such as that proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978) cannot be used directly in developmental experiments because data from children usually do not contain information which would allow their full interpretation. The present study solved this problem by using, along with Donahue's scale of requests (Donahue, 1981), a tentative politeness markers index (PMI for abbreviation) based on the studies by Brown and Levinson (1978), Garvey (1975), and Gordon and Ervin-Tripp (1984).

The PMI combines the basic traditionally-used grammatical and semantic devices for conveying linguistic politeness with the manner of presentation of requests. The following categories are included in the index:

1. Questions. This category goes beyond permission directives and question directives. It extends to all types of questions whose goal is to reduce coerciveness of utterances; for example, "Do you have time"?

2. Modals. The modals play an important role in LP not only as parts of permission directives and question directives, and should be taken into account independently of these directives. They enable a speaker to speak in terms of conditions, possibilities and external obligations, which make speech more indirect and reduce the speaker's imposition. For instance, "Can I play with you?"

3. Embedding of imperatives. This category is borrowed from the classification by Ervin Tripp (1977) and retains its original meaning. For example, "Would you help me with my homework?"

4. Downtoners. PMI uses a new word, now widely used by linguists, to refer to linguistic devices that tone down directiveness. For example, "May I borrow your radio for a second?" Garvey (1975) called them adjuncts but this term seems to be much less descriptive.

5. Politeness formulas. This category comprises ready-to-use conventional devices such as "please". Sometimes they are long and complex in terms of syntax; for instance, "I am sorry to bother you but..."

6. Hints. Hints are indirect requests which must be inferred by the listener. For example, "This cake looks delicious".

7. Need statements. This category refers to requests trying to tone down or hide the speaker's desire. For example, "I need some water".

8. Justification. Giving a reason for a request may be illustrated by the following example: "May I have some juice? I'm thirsty".

9. Joke/ humor. Its role in making requests has been stressed by Brown and Levinson (1978). They provided a number of examples, for instance: "How about lending me this old heap of junk?" (listener's new Cadillac) (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 129). The pilot study documented the importance of this category at preschool age when children discover the role of joking in social life.

A very important facet of the studies of LP is scaling polite formulas. As stressed above, in this case one does not deal with isolated utterances but with a coherent system of formulas that form a hierarchy. So far only Donahue (1981) has provided us with such a scale.

Communicative competence and the definition of LP

A number of researchers have extended the definition of politeness beyond its traditional meaning. One can easily list many fundamental elements and aspects of conversation apparently judged by language users in terms of politeness and rudeness:

1. Topic manipulating, such as choosing, sustaining, switching, presenting, and so on.

2. Turn-taking.

3. Acknowledging.

4. Adjusting to the listener e.g., choice of register, vocabulary, speech rate, use of references, catering to special needs, such as lack of shared knowledge or hearing impairment.

Extending the above list, one can add the following: talking about tactless or taboo topics, forcing a topic and staying with it despite hints from the listener, turn-taking in inappropriate situations, treating an adult listener as a child by using, for example, a simplified speech register. All the above comprise possible violations of courtesy in the process of verbal communication.

Some authors refer to the importance of paralinguistic features in conveying meaning. For example, Austin (1965) was among the first to remark on the social meaning of, as he put it, significant noises made by the non-articulated vocal tract (ibid., p. 33). He noted that, in Western cultures, the nasality often present in young boys' pronunciation sounds tough and vulgar and is often discouraged by elders (p. 34). Suzuki (1977) found American English (hm:), Japanese (hs:) (a type of hiss), and Dutch (X) (voiceless velar fricative) to express politeness, agreement, and commiseration.

Personal importance of linguistic politeness

The use of politeness forms not only reflects the network of social relations (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Holtgraves, 1986; Bardovi, & Hartford,1993; Josephides, 1999). but is also a part of it (Brown & Levison, 1978). This almost direct mapping of social life on language and vice versa becomes clearly visible in experiments with adults. Researchers have found highly regular patterns of linguistic politeness by adults. For example, Milan (1976) investigated the influence of sex and age on the variants of response to *thank you* in Puerto Rico. His subjects were 200 females and 200 males aged over 20 and under 50 years. Experimenters asked them to give directions and then thanked them lavishly. The

study revealed, amongst others, the casual form used by males addressed by two male elicitors, and significantly more polite responses with women and to female elicitors. The second part of the experiment demonstrated the joint age and sex effect: the older female subjects used the casual form 85% of the time to the younger female elicitor. The results mirror the sociological evidence concerning sex roles and age status.

It is no surprise therefore that linguistic politeness is resistant even to serious organic damage. Temple, Sabat, and Kroger reported that LP in Alzheimer's sufferers remains intact (Temple, Sabat, & Kroger, 1999). Togher and Hand documented the use of politeness markers in subjects suffering from traumatic brain injuries (Togher & Hand, 1998).

Despite obvious measurement problems, some data on the place of linguistic politeness in personal exchange have also been collected. Klimova (1979) asked 1,829 Muscovites about the most valued personality traits in their neighbors in multistory buildings, and found that 60.6% of her informants named politeness as the most important.

From some data, we know that people tend to speak in a courteous way even if it is dangerous to do so. According to Linden (1988), linguistic politeness may contribute to aviation accidents. Robins and Wolf (1988) found that 90% of the first year medical students investgated approved of using polite speech in the doctor-patient interaction even though it could decrease the efficiency of a recommended therapeutic regimen. According to Sanger, Hux, and Ritzman (1999), female juvenile delinquents use linguistic politeness despite the fact that it threatens their social image among peers.

The complexity of use of the politeness register, in light of the social relations it reflects, makes any theoretical descriptions and explanations extremely difficult. Not surprisingly, there have been very few so far.

Some researchers have tried to use cost and benefit analysis derived from equity theory, which claims that people tend to maintain equity or fairness in interpersonal relations (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1961;). We need to bear in mind, however, that this idea grew from somewhat naive beliefs in simple, one-factor explanations of social behavior. Thinking in terms of cost and benefit is based on the simple thesis that we will help others when benefits we can expect outweigh the cost of help.

Equity theory is mentioned here because, as stated earlier, the cost of compliance (sometimes called task difficulty) was listed as a contributing factor by many students of linguistic politeness acquisition (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Mitchell-Kernan & Kernan, 1977; Axia & Baroni, 1985; Meyerhoff, 1999; Rothenbuhler, 1998). At the same time, for instance Mitchell-Kernan and Kernan (1977) expressed their reservations about the possibility of finding proper operational definitions of this variable. The most important problem is the fact that cost and benefit analysis did not result in any full-fledged theory despite some endeavors (mainly Clark & Schunk, 1980).

A restricted use of cost in the studies of LP seems to be fully justified but it needs a hedge. Very often the listener helps in the situation in which he/she cannot expect any benefits, or even expects some losses. In other words, factors such as altruism or sympathy intervene with the cost and benefit principle. Obviously, one may argue that, for instance, altruists reward themselves by realizing ethical values they respect. Such an argument, however, seems rather to create a more complex problem than its solution.

Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed an approach just opposite to simple one-factor models and very soon their ideas became not only a major breakthrough in the field of sociolinguistics but also the standard. While a detailed examination of the theory in ques-

Table 2. The requests used in the study

REQUEST FORM	EXAMPLES
Zrób to (Do it)	*Zamknij drzwi.* (Close the door)
Czy [zrobisz to](Will you do it?)	*Czy zamkniesz drzwi?* (Will you close the door?)
Czy możesz... (Can You?)	*Czy możesz zamknąć drzwi* (Can you close the door?)
Czy mógłbyś (Could you?)	*Czy mógłbyś zamknąć drzwi?* (Could you close the door?)
Proszę,... (..., please)	*Proszę, zamknij drzwi.* (Please close the door.)
Czy mogę prosić, żebyś... (May I ask you to...)	*Czy mogę prosić, żebyś zamknął drzwi?* (May I ask you to close the door?)
Prosiłbym, żebyś... (I would ask you to...)	*Prosiłbym, żebyś zamknął drzwi.* (I would ask you to close the door.)
Czy byłbyś tak miły i... (Would you be so nice to ...)	*Czy byłbyś tak miły i zamknął drzwi?* (Would you be good enough to close the door.)
Byłbym wdzięczny, gdybyś... (I would be grateful if you...)	*Byłbym wdzięczny, gdybyś zamknął drzwi.* (I would be grateful if you closed the door.)
Proszę, zrób mi przysługę i... (Please do me a favor and...)	*Proszę, zrób mi przysługę i zamknij drzwi.* (Please do me a favor and close the door.)

tion lies beyond the scope of the present study, the essentials must be presented if we want to expand the developmental perspective.

Brown and Levinson borrowed some central ideas from Goffman's studies of social behavior, especially the use of the concept of face. Further, their theory rests on three fundamental assumptions: (a) the principles of language usage unveil the principles of social interaction, (b) LP is irrational in terms of a maximally efficient mode of communication (the Gricean postulates, Grice, 1975), (c) unrelated languages and cultures converge on the use of the polite register to such an extent that one can speak in terms of universals. The latter claim found support in data excerpted not only from English, but also from Tzeltal, a Mayan language, and South Indian Tamil; also occasional examples refer to Malgasy, Japanese, and other languages (see Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Experimental study

The main goal of the present study was to determine whether or not politeness formulas are used as a coherent hierarchical system in which each formula has its own stable politeness loading. The main shortcoming of the study by Donahue (1981), cited earlier in this paper, was the lack of concern with variability of judgment. She hypothesized that judgments of politeness formulas among adults are based on well-formed strategies and therefore are used in an exact way. However, no empirical evidence was collected to date to support this view.

Methodology

Subjects

One hundred psychology majors participated in the experiment, half women and half men (mean age= 21;6).

Table 3. Scale values of requests based on the judgments made by the subcjects in three trials. N= 100.

REQUEST FORM	Scale value Trial 1	Scale value Trial 2	Scale value Trial 3
Zrób to (Do it)	0.00	0.00	0.00
Czy [zrobisz to] (Will you do it?)	1.13	1.06	1.10
Czy możesz... (Can You?)	2.11	2.00	1.98
Czy mógłbyś (Could you?)	2.7	2.7	2.4
Proszę,... (..., please)	2.9	2.8	2.6
Czy mogę prosić, żebyś... (May I ask you to...)	3.11	3.01	3.01
Prosiłbym, żebyś... (I would ask you to...)	3.22	3.12	3.26
Czy byłbyś tak miły i... (Would you be good enough to ...)	4.11	4.00	4.15
Byłbym wdzięczny gdybyś... (I would be grateful if you...)	4.16	4.06	4.06
Proszę, zrób mi przysługę i... (Please do me a favor and...)	4.22	4.32	4.12

Materials

Nine polite formulas (requests) most frequently used in everyday speech were employed in the experiment. They were found in newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts by random event sampling (N= 300).

The requests were presented in 90 pairs randomly distributed throughout the list. At each stage of the experiment a new list was used (a new distribution of the tested politeness formulas).

Procedure

Participants were asked to mark the more polite formula in each pair. This task was performed three times at one week intervals.

Treatment of the data

Using Thurstone's scaling method the scale values were calculated for the data. One-way repeated measures ANOVA was performed to check for the statistical significance of possible changes in participant's judgments over time.

Results and discussion

The results of the study are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen at first glance, the hierarchy of polite formulas was coherent and stable across time. The participants judged politeness formulas in a similar way. The results of one-way repeated measures ANOVA confirm stability (F= 0,23, nonsignificant). Taking all the data together, we conclude that the use of requests seems to be governed by a number of strict rules that ensure their functionality and appropriate use.

Conclusion

The mushrooming of studies in metalinguistic awareness has resulted in numerous presentations of various aspects of reflection on language. Yet, at the same time, very little

is known about the fundamental aspects of the phenomenon in question. Metalinguistic awareness could pose a serious threat on language processing, such as slowing it down. Severe problems in language functioning could arise if metalinguistic judgments concerning different aspects of language are false. The next logical step of the research would seem to be to seek evidence that reflection on language provides language processing with useful data that help to monitor and control it. The study of the stability of metalinguistic judgments could pave the way for this new research interest.

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