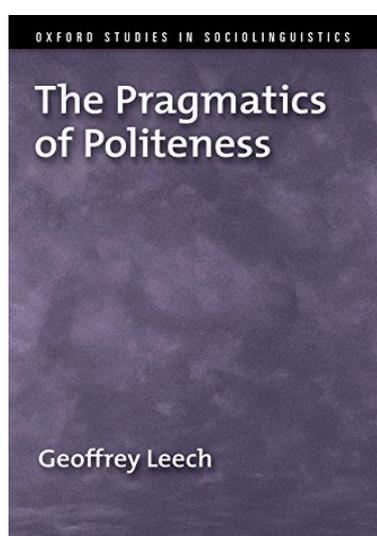# BOOK REVIEW

THE PRAGMATICS OF POLITENESS
Author: Geoffrey Leech
Publisher: Oxford University Press, 2014

Le Huu Loc*

Department of Foreign Languages, Quy Nhon University
170 An Duong Vuong, Quy Nhon City, Binh Dinh Province, Vietnam

The study of "politeness" by sociolinguists is quite new and frequently cites Brown and Levinson's work from 1978 entitled "Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena". The article was modified and republished as a book in 1987 with the title *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Ever since, there has been a substantial explosion in the amount of research on "im/ politeness" in linguistics and related fields. Geoffrey Leech can be deemed one of the pioneering authors in the discipline of politeness studies, along with Robin Lakoff (1973), Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978, 1987), and others. *The Pragmatics of Politeness* by Geoffrey Leech is a wonderful addition that serves to remind readers of the linguistic roots of this area of study. This book offers an overview of politeness and supports the idea that it is a form of communicative altruism. It describes a variety of English politeness phenomena and provides numerous instances of actual language use from reliable British and American sources to demonstrate its points. The book also presents a thorough examination of politeness in contemporary English, including all significant speech acts that are either positively or negatively linked with politeness, such as requests, apologies, compliments, offers, agreement, and disagreement. Chapters on impoliteness and the related concepts of irony (mock politeness) and banter (mock impoliteness) are also included. Additional chapters explore research techniques and learning English as a second language. The history of politeness in the English language, which spans more than a thousand years, is covered in the final chapter. Therefore, *The Pragmatics of Politeness* is intended to establish itself as a new benchmark in the study of (im)politeness.

Within the length of 337 pages, the book is divided into three main parts – Part 1 – Laying the Foundation, Part 2 –

---

* Corresponding author.

  Email address: lehuuloc@qnu.edu.vn

Politeness and Impoliteness in the Use of English, and Part 3 – Further Perspectives. In detail, **Part 1** (Laying the Foundations) includes the first three chapters, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 3. The basics of politeness are covered in **Chapter 1** (Introduction), with illustrations of eight aspects of politeness (pp. 4-9) and six fundamental distinctions (pp. 9-20) for a straightforward grasp of the topic. According to the chapter's argument, both social and psychological explanations are plausible, and the sociopsychological concept of *face* serves as a correlation between the two. **Chapter 2** (Politeness: Viewpoints) reviews earlier theories and models of politeness, including the most influential model, Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) model (pp. 33-34). The perspectives of other prominent scholars in the field are also highlighted, such as those of Robin Lakoff (p. 33), Gu (pp. 35-36), Ide (p. 36), Arndt and Janney (p. 38), Fraser and Nolan (pp. 37-38), Aijmer, Terkourafi (pp. 38-39), Eelen, Spencer-Oatey (pp. 39-41), and Watts (pp. 41-43). The claim is, despite the fact that earlier views of politeness have been presented as opposed to one another, they all add something to the general framework as it is laid out in this book. In order to reach pragmatic meaning, both the speaker and the hearer engage in problem-solving as part of the goal-oriented approach to communication described in **Chapter 3** (Pragmatics, Indirectness, and Neg-Politeness: A Basis for Politeness Modeling). It draws on the thought of Paul Grice and John Searle in particular to explain *indirectness* and *negative politeness*, returning to the roots of modern Anglo-American pragmatics. In **Chapter 4** (Politeness: The Model), which defines the Gricean idea of *maxim* as a goal-directed restriction, the book's model of politeness is presented briefly but very comprehensively.

Politeness is a social phenomenon, but it is a social phenomenon that is mostly expressed via language. Therefore, the relationship between language use and social behavior must be taken into consideration while studying politeness. It is customary to refer to this field of linguistic research as pragmatics. However, pragmatics, the study of language use and how interactants interpret it, is generally framed in terms of two interfaces: that between pragmatics and linguistic structure (also known as *pragmalinguistics*), and that between pragmatics and society (known as *sociopragmatics*) (p. ix). Right in the first chapter – Chapter 1, the author clarifies the distinctions between *pragmalinguistics* and *sociopragmatics* (pp. 13-15), *pragmalinguistic politeness* and *sociopragmatic politeness* (pp. 15-18). While not completely abandoning *sociopragmatics*, the book's author leans further towards *pragmalinguistics*, a field that has recently received less attention. Therefore, instead of having a broad perspective on how politeness connects to social conduct and society at large, this book highlights the necessity of an in-depth perusal of how language is utilized for politeness.

With the orientation towards *pragmalinguistics*, Leech's primary objective in this work is to present a full and explicit theoretical description of what he means by linguistic politeness and how this ties in with current semantics/pragmatics theory building. He performs an excellent job in this regard. Indeed, he presents the concept of *communicative altruism*, which is influenced by discoveries in evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and game theory (pp. 21-23). Politeness, as the author put forward, is "to speak or behave in such a way as to (appear to) give benefit or value not to yourself but to the other person(s), especially the person(s) you are conversing with" (p. 3). However, Leech goes on to say that communicative altruism is not true altruism and should not be confused with it (p. 24). Politeness is the appearance of

caring about others. It is about employing language that expresses concern for others. The question of whether that concern is genuine is another, and it is one that psychologists, not linguists, should be concerned about (p. 90).

The book's author specifies the subject matters of politeness in ten maxims (up from six from his 1983 book), namely (1) *Generosity,* (2) *Tact,* (3) *Approbation,* (4) *Modesty,* (5) *Obligation of Speaker (S) to Other people (O),* (6) *Obligation of O to S,* (7) *Agreement, (8) Opinion reticence,* (9) *Sympathy,* and (10) *Feeling reticence* (p. 91). Each maxim, like in previous works, is tied to a certain type of speech events (e.g. Generosity typically pertains to Commissives, Tact to Directives, Approbation to Compliments, and so on). This time, however, there is a fundamental separation between *pos-politeness* maxims (those relating to raising O, which are maxims (1), (3), (5), (7), (9)) and *neg-politeness* maxims (those dealing with lowering S, which are maxims (2), (4), (6), (8) and (10)). Although the dichotomy between *pos-politeness* and *neg-politeness* is prompted by Brown and Levinson's comparable differentiation between *positive* and *negative politeness*, Leech utilizes these terms differently. As a result, he uses abbreviated terminology rather than full terms. Most importantly, the addition of pos-politeness is his attempt to combine the concept of face-enhancement alongside face-threat. This is because regarding pos-politeness, "we *magnify* or *strengthen* the expression of (positive) value", whereas "to increase the degree of politeness, we *diminish* or *soften* the expression of (negative) value in the transaction" in the instance of neg-politeness (p. 11). Despite the inclusion of face-enhancing acts (p. 99), the overriding impression is that neg-politeness, the type that "typically involves indirectness, hedging and understatement", is "the most important type" (p. 11). This

argument, which resonates with similar claims made by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 74), is justified on the basis that we "need, in studying neg-politeness, to develop a pragmatics of politeness that will handle the indirect speech acts and implicit meanings so characteristic of neg-politeness," whereas "the intensification of meaning characteristic of pos-politeness, on the whole, does not have such problems" (p. 55). This leads to a fascinating discussion of pragmatics as problem solving (from both the speaker's and the hearer's viewpoints), the relationship between syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels in utterance interpretation, and Neo-Gricean defaults in Chapter 3.

By attaching explicit semantic content to the maxims, Leech claims (as he did in 1983) that politeness is about maximizing the display of polite beliefs while diminishing the presentation of impolite beliefs (1983, p. 81). The current articulation of the general principle of politeness states that "in order to be polite, S expresses or implies meanings that associate a favorable value with what pertains to O or associate an unfavorable value with what pertains to S" (p. 90). While this makes the current scheme adaptable enough to accommodate for impoliteness (basically, it is doing the reverse of what the maxims prescribe; **Chapter 8**), it also makes politeness an issue of what we say, instead of how we say it, as is frequently stated. This distinction distinguishes Leech from others (including Lakoff, Brown and Levinson) who have attempted to determine the linguistic devices prevalently used to convey politeness based on their form (e.g. conditionals, deictic switches, the T/V pronominal system – familiar and polite/respectful second-person pronouns, the subjunctive, diminution, and so on) instead of their meaning.

The early "pioneering" research on politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987,

1978), Leech (1983), and others has drawn criticism. Leech is well aware of this. Much like most of the pragmatics in the 1970s and 1980s, it ignores significant, if not radical, variances across the diversity of language communities and is consequently geared toward Western, and more especially Anglo-American, culture. In an effort to avoid this flaw, Leech submits **Chapter 4** (where he presents his model) to representative readers of various cultures, who have been kind enough to provide him with feedback and illustrations, to demonstrate how an English-language-oriented account holds true or does not pertain to their own language/culture (p. xii). Leech (2007), upon which Chapter 4 is heavily based, offers Chinese, Japanese, and Korean instances and discussions to illustrate how the paradigm may be applied to Eastern languages and cultures.

Part 2 (Politeness and Impoliteness in the Use of English) covers the next four chapters, from Chapter 5 to Chapter 8. Using corpora, this part does a rigorous descriptive examination of politeness phenomena in English. In detail, **Chapter 5** (A Case Study: Apologies) centers on an instance of a specific speech event that demonstrates politeness: the apology. **Chapter 6** (Requests and Other Directives) puts emphasis on speech events with a competitive purpose: directives and, within that type, requests. Requests are evidently the most intriguing and researched of all the utterance kinds concerning politeness, specifically with respect to the English language. This book expands on its treatment of polite phenomena by addressing a variety of common speech events from a pragmalinguistic standpoint. Indeed, the topics covered in **Chapter 7** encompass offers, invitations, and undertakings (pp. 180-186), compliments and criticisms (pp. 186-196), thanks (pp. 196-201), agreement and disagreement, advice and recommendations (pp. 201-208), as well as congratulations, condolences, good wishes (pp. 208-212), greetings, and farewells (pp. 212-214). The model of politeness described in Chapter 4 can also be used to explain phenomena in **Chapter 8**, which in some ways clash with politeness. The four phenomena are *nonpoliteness* (pp. 216-219)*, conversational irony* (pp. 232-238)*, banter* (pp. 238-243)*,* and *impoliteness* (pp. 219-232). All of these phenomena, in some respects, contradict politeness, but in diverse ways.

Although polite language and its utilization is emphasized, the author does not disregard impolite linguistic behavior, which has recently gained popularity as a subject of study. Chapter 8 of the book includes a discussion on this subject. However, since politeness is typically seen as the unmarked type of behavior, the author understandably focuses much of his attention on politeness in other chapters instead of impoliteness. This reflects his belief that politeness serves as a kind of behavioral norm in the vast majority of social situations and across a range of contexts, at least for British English speakers and also those of many other languages, while impolite behavior is apparently a marked form of speech and, as a result, pronounced when it occurs. Therefore, politeness is seen as unmarked and acting as the norm in most speech contexts, despite not being mandatory, in the author's opinion, in contrast to impoliteness, where illocution is far more rarely utilized intentionally to generate disharmony and as a result, draws attention to itself.

Part 3 (Further Perspectives) encompasses the last three chapters, Chapter 9 to Chapter 11. A summary of the approaches for conducting empirical research on politeness is given in **Chapter 9** (Methods of Data Collection: Empirical Pragmatics). On the one hand, there are techniques for obtaining native speakers' opinions or replicas of polite linguistic conduct. On the other hand, there are

unconstrained data-collecting approaches, such as exploiting naturally available corpus data, as discussed in detail in Chapters 5-7 of this book. When looking for certain types of linguistic behavior such as compliments, the latter approaches can pose difficulties because they are unconstrained. The former methodologies entail options that are extremely confined (such as *multiple-choice tests* (pp. 250-251)). A spectrum ranging from fabricated, elicited comprehension-task data to uncontrolled, observed production data can be drawn between these methodologies. Commonly employed intermediate locations on this scale are *discourse completion tests* (DCTs) (pp. 252-253), which allow participants to develop linguistic responses to a contextually determined stimulus, and advancing to the unrestricted end are the *role plays* (pp. 253-254), where subjects converse with another speaker in a contextually specified conversation. Each data collection method has its own pluses and minuses. The focus of **Chapter 10** (Interlanguage Pragmatics and Politeness Across Languages and Cultures) is the study of how people develop pragmatic competence in a second language (L2). This topic falls under the umbrella of "interlanguage pragmatics" (ILP), which is a large field of research. Lack of or excessive politeness in learners might result from *pragmatic failure* (pp. 262-264), and the learners can be assessed as *underpolite* or *overpolite* accordingly. **Chapter 11** (Politeness and the History of English), the final chapter, provides a brief account of politeness in the English language. There has been relatively little research on this topic, and there are numerous gaps and undisclosed areas that continue to be examined.

The direction of current research on politeness is somewhat skewed by this book. We have observed the emergence of new perspectives that emphasize the complexity of politeness and impoliteness as they emerge over prolonged discourse. In some respects, this has been a good thing since it has made us face the many-faceted, constantly-evolving behavior of people in conversational discourse, workplace discourse, public discourse through the media, and so forth – often with intriguing and enlightening outcomes. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in abstractions, nuance, and terminological ambiguities. It is simple to become lost in the subtleties and specifics of discourse; concentrating on a long passage of dialogue can result in many contextual details that require explanation but cannot be applied generally. Seeing the bigger picture has proven to be challenging. Since pragmatics has its roots in linguistics, the book's author holds the belief that there is much to be gained by returning to its fundamentals. Consequently, the *pragmalinguistic* approach that starts by looking closely at language, as adopted in this book, can be rationalized once again.

Admittedly, that the book primarily concentrates on the English language is a major downside. This book fundamentally centers on two important regional dialects of the English language, namely British and American English, with British English (the author's variant) receiving more emphasis than American English. And while it is often believed that the comfortable middle classes have been the preserve of politeness since the eighteenth century and still are today, this has not been properly investigated, and the author has little to say about it. In this book, the study of politeness variation in the enormous cultural community of English language users has been largely ignored by Leech, who is still focusing on English in this work. Little attention has been paid to politeness according to sociocultural characteristics including geography, gender, age, and social class. How, for instance, are English-speaking communities in Singapore or the United States different from those in the UK in terms of politeness? How does the politeness used by male and female language

users differ from one another? And while it is often believed that the comfortable middle classes have been the preserve of politeness since the eighteenth century and still are today, this has not been properly investigated, and the author has little to say about it. Other characteristics of variance, particularly gender disparities, have, on the other hand, been extensively investigated and discussed. As a result, the author advises that additional theoretical work be conducted on such concerns as the dissimilarity among the types of speakers of English, "just as there is a need for a sociopragmatic angle, to complement the pragmalinguistic angle that is more prominent here" (p. xiii).

The Pragmatics of Politeness is divided into eleven chapters; one of which gives a model of politeness (Chapter 4); another investigates pragmatics and politeness across many languages and cultures (Chapter 10), and one chapter explores politeness and the history of English (Chapter 11). As a result, this is a book that is both specific ("eight characteristics of politeness," "five explicande," "politeness: the model") and broad, with chapters on topics such as "Interlanguage Pragmatics and Politeness Across Languages and Cultures" (Chapter 10) and "Politeness and the History of English" (Chapter 11). This book's principal purpose is not to teach readers "how to be polite." Its main objective is to describe politeness phenomena in English. As a crucial component of that, it also establishes a framework for analysis – a model or theory of politeness as a trait of human conduct (p. x). This is no easy task, especially considering the range, depth, and even subtlety of (im)politeness characteristics. The book is also assumed to contribute to English pragmatics, as studies of English phonetics, phonology, and syntax are common, but accounts of English pragmatics are harder to obtain.

Leech has published a book that views politeness not as a study of social niceties, i.e., "the icing on the cake," but rather as "a needful ingredient of human society" (p. 27) and as something vital to that society's continuous progress. Although Leech recognizes that "no serious account of cross-cultural pragmatics can be attempted in this book" (p. xii), he expects that the book will provide "a serious contribution to the pragmatics of English," or, as he phrases it, a "pragmalinguistic angle" (p. xiii). *The Pragmatics of Politeness* accomplishes this in a substantial way, making a genuine and comprehensible contribution to a burgeoning and significant body of research on the pragmatics of English. This is extremely noteworthy because it is the effort of a linguist, a leading figure who has played an integral role in the development of the field of pragmatics.

References

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. N. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56-311). Cambridge University Press.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Lakoff, R. (1973, April). The logic of politeness: or, minding your p's and q's. In *Proceedings from the Annual Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society* (Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 292-305). Chicago Linguistic Society.

Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. Routledge.

Leech, G. (2007). Politeness: Is there an east-west divide? *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture*, *3*(2), 167-206. https://doi.org/10.1515/pr.2007.009

Leech, G. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness. Oxford studies in sociolinguistics.* Oxford University Press.