EL4252: Honours Year
Session 9: Watts's politeness theory

1. Watts bemoans existing 'theories'

- Robin Lakoff's conversational-maxim approach
- Leech's grand scheme of incorporating politeness into general pragmatics
- The project by Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper – the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns (CCSARP) in the 1980s: politeness$_2$ as a culturally constructed concept
- Arndt and Janney's distinction between social politeness, interpersonal politeness and tact – into social psychology
- Fraser and Nolen's conversational contract theory of politeness
- Matsumoto's and Ide's work on discernment *v* volition: the Japanese notion of *wakimae*
- There are many criticisms of Brown & Levinson's work – some question the universality enterprise; some criticise their dualistic and individualistic notion of 'face'; some think they have distorted Goffman's notion of face
- Werkhofer (1992) suggests that politeness is like money: both are socially constituted mediums; both are symbolic mediums (association with values); both are historically constituted; both can become ends rather than means; the chances of mastering both mediums are diminished.

2. Suggests a reversion to the original Goffman

He suggests that facework is not the same as politeness. Face is a shared property granted by the community for each particular situation, whereas the 'line' is the approach taken by the individual.

3. Lay politeness (politeness$_1$) *v*. theoretical politeness (politeness$_2$)

4. Not universal but culturally situated

To use a lay concept in one language as a universal concept for all languages and cultures is particularly inappropriate. (p. 13)

... politeness$_1$, whatever terms are used in whatever language to refer to mutually cooperative behaviour, considerateness for others, polished behaviour, etc., is a locus of social struggle over discursive practices. (p. 17)

... there can be no idealised, universal scientific concept of (im)politeness (i.e. (im)politeness$_2$) which can be applied to instances of social interaction across cultures, subcultures and languages. (p. 23)

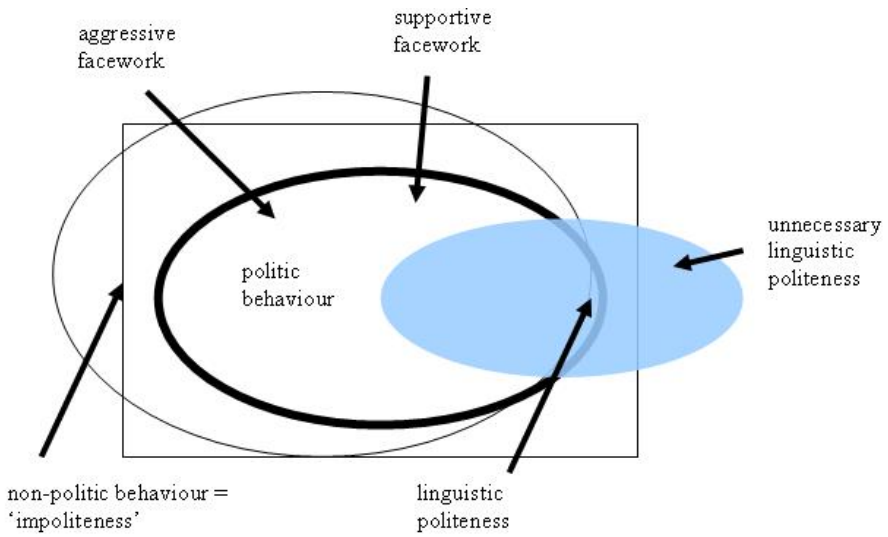
5. The notion of politic behaviour

Linguistic behaviour should be evaluated from the point of view of expected behaviour.

... linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the on-going interaction, i.e. as non-salient, should be called *politic behaviour*. ... Linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable, i.e. salient behaviour, should be called *polite* or *impolite* depending on whether the behaviour itself tends towards the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness. (p. 19)

6. Link to Bourdieu

[Politic behaviour] is related to the habitus in Bourdieu's theory of practice in that it accounts for the knowledge of which linguistic structures are expectable in a specific type of interaction in a specific social field... Behaviour which is not part of the politic behaviour of an interaction type is 'inappropriate' and open to classification as 'impolite'. (Watts 2003: 161)



He summarises his theory in the diagram (taken from Fig 10.1, p. 260).
The oval with the thick border = totality of forms of social practice.
Aggressive facework lies on the boundaries of the expected politic behaviour.

House, J. and G. Kasper (1981), 'Politeness markers in English and German', in F. Coulmas (ed.), *Conversational routine* (The Hague: Mouton), pp. 45–64
Sperber, D and D Wilson (1995), *Relevance: communication and cognition*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell)
Watts, R (1989), 'Relevance and relational work: linguistic politeness as politic behavior', *Multilingua* 8(2/3): 131–67.
Watts, Richard J (2003), *Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
Werkhofer, K. (1992), 'Traditional and modern views: the social constitution and the power of politeness', in R. Watts, S. Ide and K. Ehlich (eds), *Politeness in language: studies in its history, theory and practice* (Berlin: Mouton), pp. 155–199

Texts to examine

Supportive facework usually lies closer to the area associated with potentially polite behaviour.
On the left: non-politic behaviour, outside the borders of politic behaviour.
Shaded oval: dispute on whether it represents politic or polite behaviour.

7. More on Bourdieu's theory of practice

(a) *habitus*

The *habitus*, in Latin 'a state of being', 'a demeanour, manner or bearing', or the 'style of dress or toilet', is the set of dispositions to act in certain ways, which generates cognitive and bodily practice in the individual. (Watts 2003: 149)

(b) *linguistic capital*

Linguistic resources can also be seen as a kind of capital (with value, exchange, currency and conversion). Therefore, politeness$_1$ is payment, but it is payment in excess of what is required by politic behaviour. Therefore:

(i) Assertives *give* a value and can therefore expect the *payment* of some other equivalent value.
(ii) Interrogatives *request* a value but cannot automatically expect the payment of that value. If the value is given, however, some for of *return payment* can be expected by the giver.
(iii) Imperatives *request* a value, which may or may not be in the form of a linguistic utterance, and generally *do* expect the payment of that value. (Watts 2003: 154)

(c) *doxa*

The *doxa* of a field is the 'undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field' (Bourdieu 1990: 68). A challenge to this represents *heterodoxy* whereas an attempt to restore this represents *orthodoxy*.

(d) *symbolic power*

Symbolic power is 'every power which manages to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations which are the basis of its force' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 4).

8. Formulaic and semi-formulaic expressions

Formulaic, ritualised utterances are: highly conventionalised utterances, containing linguistic expressions that are used in ritualised forms of verbal interaction and have been reduced from fully grammatical structures to the

status of extra-sentential markers of politic behaviour. They have little or no internal syntactico-semantic structure. (Watts 2003: 168)

And semi-formulaic utterances are: conventionalised utterances containing linguistic expressions that carry out indirect speech acts appropriate to the politic behaviour of a social situation. They may also be used, in certain circumstances, as propositional structures in their own right.

These expressions emphasise ***procedural*** *rather than* ***propositional*** *meaning. (Roughly: Halliday's interpersonal meaning v. ideational meaning.) These expressions might have undergone* ***pragmaticalisation*** *(rather than* ***grammaticalisation****). An example of grammaticalisation is going to, which might have the semantic content (of movement or of intention) bleached, to become like a modal verb. Examples of pragmaticalisation include you know (loss of referential meaning to become a solidarity marker), good-bye (from invocation 'God be with you' to a leave-taking formula), please (from 'if it please you' to a request marker). These expressions are therefore* ***expressions of procedural meaning*** *or EPMs.*

The direction of the process of grammaticalisation is from *lexical item* to *syntactic structure* to *morphological unit* (Hopper and Traugott 1993: chapter 5). Pragmaticalisation works in the opposite direction showing a development from fully morphosyntactic structures to reduced structures with procedural rather than propositional meaning ... (Watts 2003: 179)

Politeness structures according to House and Kasper (1981)

- **Politeness markers** (to 'show deference to the addressee and to bid for cooperative behaviour'), *eg please, if you wouldn't mind*
- **Play-downs** (to 'tone down the perlocutionary effect of an utterance is likely to have on the addressee'), *eg I wondered/thought if ..., I was wondering/thinking ..., would it be a good idea ..., wouldn't it be a good idea ...*
- **Consultative devices** (to involve the addressee and bid for his/her cooperation), *eg would you mind ..., could you ...*
- **Hedges** (avoidance of giving a precise propositional content), *eg kind of, sort of, somehow, more or less, rather, and what have you*
- **Understaters** (under-representing the propositional content), *eg a bit, a little bit, a second, a moment, briefly*
- **Downtoners** (to 'modulate the impact' of the speaker's utterance), *eg just, simply, possibly, perhaps, really*
- **Committers** (to lower the degree of committal to the content of the utterance), *eg I think, I believe, I guess, in my opinion*

- **Forewarning** (making a metastatement on an FTA), *eg far be it from me to criticise, but ..., you may find this a bit boring, but ...*
- **Hesitators** (pauses filled with non-lexical phonetic material), *eg er, uhh, ah*
- **Scope-staters** (expressing subjective opinion about the state of affairs), *eg I'm afraid you're in my seat, I disappointed that you couldn't ...*
- **Agent avoiders** (agent suppressed or impersonalised), *eg people don't do X*

9. Relevance theory

Watts sees Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory as a way of coping with the inadequacies of Grice. It allows for

- a theory of communication that goes being the code theory
- the role played by cognition (not just intention)
- degrees of success in communication rather than a binary distinction between success and failure

The key axiom is that relevance is assessed in terms of the assumptions which can be accessed by inferential processing. An utterance that allows for more contextual effects and requires less processing effort is more relevant.

10. More on relevance theory

Sperber and Wilson (1995) develop a cognitive theory (*ie* based on how hearers or readers understand or interpret, rather than the speakers' or writers' intentions). They hold that only the maxim of relation (relevance) is necessary, defined

* the **ostensive stimulus** is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's **effort** to process it.
* The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences. (p. 270)

Stronger implicatures are more relevant than weaker implicatures. Implicatures that require less processing effort are more relevant than those that require more processing effort.

Bourdieu, P. (1990), *The logic of practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron (1990 [1977]), *Reproduction in education society and culture* (London: Sage).

Hopper, P. and E. Traugott (1993), *Grammaticalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)