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# THE BACKGROUND OF POLITENESS UNIVERSALS<sup>1</sup>

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Early accounts of politeness have been widely criticised for adopting a universalist stance while attempting to account for a phenomenon that is clearly culture-dependent. In reaction to this criticism, Leech (2007/2014) has argued for the necessity of politeness universals, on condition that they allow for the investigation of the relevant cultural variation. This paper sets out to provide additional support for Leech's claim, by pursuing the argument that even though different societies have in principle different politeness values, all members of the same cultural and/or linguistic group typically accept very similar sets of such values. This argument is theoretically supported by resort to Searle's notion of the Background, as a body of preintentional mental capacities that safeguards the alignment of our intentional states with that of our peers. Given then the systematicity with which we develop a culturally uniform understanding of politeness, the postulation of politeness universals, in Leech's sense, cannot but be a useful analytical tool when theorising about politeness.

**Key words:** intentionality, intention attribution, theory of mind, politeness, universalism, Searle.

## Introduction

Alongside Lakoff (1973) and Brown and Levinson (1987), Leech's pioneering work in his *Principles of Pragmatics* (1983) marked the establishment of politeness as a topic of central interest for the study of pragmatics. As a result, we nowadays have at our disposal an impressive amount of research on how polite<sup>2</sup> conversational behaviour can be described. Early attempts to tackle politeness, like the ones mentioned above, followed a broadly Gricean outlook, by stipulating universal principles and/or strategies that result in the communication of a polite attitude. However, in recent years, such attempts have been extensively attacked on the grounds that they seek to posit a cross-culturally applicable theory of politeness, when the phenomenon under investigation is itself highly dependent on cultural diversity. This criticism has in turn given rise to discursive (cf. Locher & Watts 2005) and co-constructivist theories of politeness (cf. Arundale 1999, Haugh 2014), which view the evaluation of politeness as derivative of *in situ* interactional negotiation that is governed by culture-specific norms<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I will only be using the term 'politeness' and its derivatives for the sake of convenience, but this should not be taken as a sign of neglect for the equally important area of impoliteness (cf. Culpeper 1996). As a matter of fact, I believe that my argumentation applies to the discussion of impoliteness in pretty much the same way that it does to that of politeness.

<sup>3</sup> Even though I am subsuming discursive and the interactional theories of politeness under the same rubric here, on the grounds that they share the same motivation against their universalist

In what unfortunately ended up being his last contribution to the field, Leech (2007/2014) addresses this criticism, by offering the following commentary:

Although I do not want to underestimate the large differences between polite linguistic behaviour in different societies, I believe that there is a common pragmatic and behavioural basis for them, so that (for example) when Chinese speakers talk of *lǐmào*<sup>1</sup> and English speakers talk of *politeness* they are not talking about totally unrelated phenomena. (Leech 2007:200)

He then suggests that politeness can be fruitfully approached by investigating the socio-cultural variants of certain universal ‘scales of value’, as these are encountered in different cultures, as well as the pragmalinguistic forms of language which are used to encode them. Such sociopragmatic scales include at least the following (Leech 2014:103):

(i) *Vertical distance* between *S*[peaker] and *O*[ther person(s), commonly the addressee(s)] (in terms of status, power, role, age, etc.); cf. Brown & Levinson’s P factor.

(ii) *Horizontal distance* between *S* and *O* (intimate, familiar, acquaintance, stranger, etc.); cf. Brown & Levinson’s D factor.

(iii) *Cost/benefit*: how large is the benefit, the cost, the favour, the obligation, etc. (cf. Brown & Levinson’s R factor), i.e., the real socially-defined value of what is being transacted.

(iv) *Strength* of socially-defined rights and obligations, e.g., a teacher’s obligations to a student; a host’s obligations to a guest, service providers’ obligations to their clients or customers. [...]

(v) “*Self-territory*” and “*other-territory*” (in-group membership vs. out-group). There are degrees of membership of ‘self-territory’ and ‘other-territory’.

Even though in these scales Leech makes use of categories familiar from Brown and Levinson’s work (1987), he clearly distinguishes his approach from their universalist stance, by stating that his position has been that “a model of politeness should be generalizable to various cultures, and should provide the basis for studying (im-)politeness in different languages and societies” (2014:83).

In line with this position, my aim in this paper is to provide an account of how such scales of value get shaped in society, and more specifically how speakers who share similar cultural backgrounds tend to uniformly agree on what is considered polite. In this regard, in what follows, I will not deal with the appropriateness of the particular scales that Leech puts forth, but will rather focus on the preconditions that enable the members of a cultural group to share the same (or almost the same) assumptions in relation to polite behaviour. To this effect, the idea that I will pursue is that our evaluation of politeness is usually consistent with that of our peers because we have a natural tendency to share our conceptualisation of the world with them.

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counterparts, it should be acknowledged that they also exhibit differences among them (see, for example, Haugh 2007a).

<sup>1</sup> Here, Leech alludes to Gu’s analysis (1990) of the differences between the Chinese notion of politeness and its Western counterpart.

### **Attributing intentions and the Background**

Most research in the domain of inferential pragmatics is based on the assumption that communication depends crucially on our ability to understand the mental states of others, by means of attributing to them intentions that enable us to interpret their behaviour as “action guided by beliefs and desires” (Sperber 2000:123). The ease and rapidity with which we typically manage to attribute such intentions to our peers has been one of the main reasons that has led several psychologists and philosophers to hypothesise that this ability, commonly referred to as ‘theory of mind’, is actually governed by an innately specified, dedicated mental module (cf. Leslie 1987, Fodor 1992, Sperber 1994, Baron-Cohen 1995). But even though the advantages of having such a module have been repeatedly attested from the perspective of evolutionary psychology (cf. Byrne & Whiten 1988, Whiten & Byrne 1997, Sperber 2000), an equally important question seems to have been neglected: how is it that most assumptions that we make on the spot about our peer’s mental states succeed in capturing what our peers are likely to be thinking about?

The following observation provides a good starting point for the answer that I would like to entertain:

It is not that normal people are all that accurate in reading the feelings and thoughts of others or in knowing their own. What we are, rather, is conventional: We come up with reasonable, conventional, somewhat corrigible hypotheses about what others deem relevant in their conversations or interactions with us. (Bruner 1995:11)

Bruner may have made this comment with a view to contrasting the mindreading ability of (what he calls) normal people with that of autistic individuals, who apparently “have great difficulty” (ibid.) acquiring the relevant conventions, but in the context of my question above, he makes an interesting point: our theory of mind ability is dependent on the way in which we conceptualise both the world around us as well as how our peers view it. If this is correct, it could be argued that we are able to attribute intentions to our peers as accurately as we customarily do, simply because he have “a need to ‘tune’ [our...] conceptualisations to those of others”, in the sense of developing “a common understanding of the world” with them (Jackendoff 2002:330). It is this intuitive idea that I believe can be approached, at the theoretical level, by resort to Searle’s concept of the Background (with a capital ‘B’).

While discussing intentionality, i.e. “that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at or about or of objects and states of affairs in the world” (1983:1), Searle made the rather uncontroversial claim that “every intentional state consists of a representative content in a certain psychological mode” (1983:11), where content is meant to signify some mental representation. Our perspective of the world at any given moment then can be viewed as “a [...] system of explicit and potentially explicit beliefs and desires” (Holland 1986:104), or what Searle called the Network (again, with a capital ‘N’). In this picture, the main characteristic of the Network is that it is a large complex of psychological states, which, apart of our beliefs and desires at any given moment, also comprises “subsidiary intentions as well as hopes and fears, anxieties and anticipations, feelings of frustration and satisfaction” (Searle 1983:141).

Clearly, given the complexity of our thought processes, there is good reason to believe that our conceptualisation of the world comprises a vast number of interconnected intentional (or maybe even non-intentional<sup>1</sup>) states, but since these states are essentially personal, it should be in principle quite difficult to align our perspective of the world with that of another individual. What is it then that gives us the ability to come up with ‘conventional’ attributions of intentionality to our peers, as Bruner suggests that we do? This is where I believe that the notion of the Background can be seen to come to play.

According to Searle, “the Background is a set of nonrepresentational mental capacities that enable all representing to take place” (1983:143). In the context of intentionality then, the Background is essentially viewed as preintentional, “in the sense that though not a form [...] of intentionality, it is nonetheless a precondition or set of preconditions for intentionality” (ibid). Therefore, the Background can be best seen as a set of dispositions that enable us to mentally represent our beliefs, plans of action and so on and so forth, or in other words, to create and entertain certain assumptions about the world.

In his account, Searle differentiates between two relative categories within the Background<sup>2</sup>. The first one is dubbed the ‘deep’ Background, and comprises “at least all of those Background capacities that are common to all normal human beings in virtue of their biological makeup – capacities such as walking, eating, grasping, perceiving, recognizing, and the preintentional stance that takes account of the solidity of things, and independent existence of objects and other people” (1983:143—144). In this respect, we are, for example, able to have the belief that jumping off the top of a building will get us to the ground, simply because our deep Background gives us the disposition to mentally represent a folk understanding of gravitational force. Turning to the second Background category, which Searle calls *local Background* or “local cultural practices”, it is hypothesised to include “such things as opening doors, drinking beers from bottles, and the preintentional stance that we take toward such things as cars, refrigerators, money and cocktail parties” (1983:144). Therefore, it would be because of this local Background that people in most western societies can, for instance, have the belief and thus expectation that a soup will be served with a spoon, something that might not be the case in other parts of the world.

From Searle’s perspective, despite not being mentally represented per se, the massive amount of know-how and capacities that the Background stands for is mental and not metaphysical in any sense (1983:154). As already mentioned above, it is essentially a set of dispositions that enable us to entertain the mental representations that we do. In terms of the present discussion then, it should be reasonable to assume that because we have the same preconditions for intentionality with other people, we can be reasonably confident in the assumptions we make about their corresponding thoughts.

<sup>1</sup> Such non-intentional states can comprise various “forms of nervousness, elation, and undirected anxiety” (Searle 1983:1).

<sup>2</sup> Searle also makes a further distinction within the Background about preconditions of knowing *how things are*, e.g. that the air will not stop flowing in our lungs, and knowing *how to do things*, e.g. that we know how to swallow food, but I will not go into them here, as these distinctions are mainly used by Searle for the purposes of illustrating the concept of the Background rather than as absolute subcategories of it.

Since, by definition, we share a deep Background with every individual in the world and a local Background with a large proportion of the people with whom we interact everyday, we are bound to attribute to them intentions, beliefs and desires that they are likely to have themselves. It is therefore because of my *savoir-faire* of how humans walk that I am able to entertain some assumptions about walking that I can expect to be manifest to my audience too when I utter the sentence ‘*Let’s go for a walk*’. Similarly, it is because of my local Background that I can confidently guess the mental representations that a bartender will most likely include in his context of interpreting my order of a glass of wine.

Naturally, this is not meant to say that as an interlocutor I am consciously more confident about my understanding of others’ intentionality, but rather that I engage in successful communication in a more mechanistic way than, as Bruner suggests, an autistic person would. In this sense, the notion of the Background can be used to explain the tendency we have in our everyday communication practices to be conventional in our attribution of assumptions to others without having to go through lengthy trains of thought about what they are likely to be thinking.

### **Spontaneous evaluations of politeness**

One of the basic assumptions of most accounts of pragmatics is that for communication to be successful some sharedness of information between the communicator and the audience is necessary. If we take the notion of the Background seriously, it should be plausible to assume that it is because of their shared Background that, when engaging in communication, two individuals will probably make use of and attribute to each other intentional states that are similar enough in content. In all likelihood, they will not even perceive these thoughts as being merely similar, but will just go on entertaining assumptions that they believe to be identical to the ones their interlocutors entertain; something that effectively increases their confidence that they will recover some speaker-intended meaning.

Even so, perceiving two thoughts as being identical is not equivalent to them actually being so<sup>1</sup>. Again, the Background can provide us with the theoretical machinery to identify what it means for two mental representations to be sufficiently similar in the relevant sense. Since we all conceptualise the world through different experiences, it is most likely that our assumptions about the world will differ from those of our peers in their actual content. However, given that the Background is by definition mental but still linked to a certain perceived reality in the world, like that we walk by using our legs, or in a community, like that we customarily sleep on beds, the dispositions that it gives us to entertain certain assumptions about our walking or sleeping in beds will still be the same among all of us in terms of our deep Background or some of us when we share a local Background. Therefore, even if our resulting assumptions about walking or sleeping have strictly speaking different contents, these contents will still be similar enough to each other in a way that allows for successful communication to take place.

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the perils of content similarity, see Fodor & Lepore (1992, 1999).

For example, when my mother would tell me ‘*Don’t stand too close to the edge of the cliff!*’ when I was young, she would bring to the foreground of her attention certain contextual assumptions which should include an assumption about things falling and would, by association, also think that if I slipped, I would fall to the ground and hurt myself. In all likelihood, I would also employ in my context of interpretation a corresponding assumption akin to gravitational risks. However, since my mother and I have grown to mentally represent our gravity-related assumptions through different experiences, it is practically impossible for our corresponding thoughts to have the exact same content. What prevents them from being too different would be our deep Background, which gives us the same disposition to entertain mental representations about things falling. In this sense, if our underlying precondition for such thoughts is the same, as this is derived by the same observed phenomenon in the world, then, even though we do not realistically have access to our interlocutor’s mental contents, we can still manage to incorporate in our context for production or interpretation assumptions that will be similar enough to his/hers.

Applying this rationale to our conceptualisation of politeness, it seems that the relevant Background that affects it is the local one, which after all determines the mental representation of cultural practices. Therefore, the more the local Backgrounds of two individuals intersect, the more similar their spontaneous evaluations of politeness will be. A characteristic example of how differences in the local Background can affect the recognition of a polite attitude can be found in the context of intercultural communication. In this setting, interlocutors are by definition members of different cultural groups, and if they have not been sufficiently exposed to the cultural and linguistic norms that permeate each other’s understanding of polite behaviour, miscommunication is bound to take place. Consider, for example, the following interaction between Akiko, a Japanese student, and Melody, an American one, which Kecskes discusses in his recent treatise (2013:214):

A: Melody, I have received the travel grant.

M: *Nooou, get out of here!*

A: You should not be rude. I did get it.

M: OK. I was not rude, just happy for you.

From a theoretical perspective, the attribution of mental representations related to politeness to preconditions belonging to the local Background helps safeguard the common treatment of politeness as culture-specific, since different local Backgrounds would inevitably give rise to different conceptualisations of politeness. At the same time, however, it allows us to identify general categories that can have an effect on our evaluation of polite behaviour. Such categories can therefore be unproblematically assumed to be universally applicable, if they are taken to be what Leech calls ‘scales of value’, or principles in the following non-universalist sense:

The essential idea is this: interactional systematics are based largely on universal principles. But the application of the principles differs systematically across cultures, and within cultures across subcultures, categories and groups. (Brown & Levinson 1987:283)

### Conclusion: Intentionality and intention

In conclusion to this paper, I would like to briefly discuss how my proposed solution to the problem of establishing universal principles of politeness while at the same time respecting cross-cultural variation can deal with another criticism of Gricean accounts that has recently gained considerable momentum. Apart from being accused of putting forth universalist claims, Gricean theories of politeness have also been criticised for assuming that the recognition of politeness is directly linked with the recognition of speaker intentions, which makes it necessary to resort to the theoretical construct of implicature<sup>1</sup> in order to describe politeness. As Haugh characteristically discusses (2014:149—157)<sup>2</sup>, by doing so, Gricean accounts fail to accommodate the commonly accepted view that politeness is usually “seen but unnoticed”, and thus generally “anticipated” in interaction (cf. Escandell-Vidal 1998, Fraser 2005, Haugh 2003, Jary 1998, Terkourafi 2003). Since, therefore, ‘politeness implicatures’ may or may not be occasioned in some particular instance of communication, the argument goes, they should not be treated as being inferred as part of speaker-intended meaning in the traditional philosophical sense, but rather as social actions that are interactionally achieved.

In light of this, Haugh suggests that a framework of interactional emergence, such as the Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication (Arundale 1999, 2005), would be a better fit for the description of politeness tokens than traditional intention-based pragmatics. Clearly, a lot depends on the notion of intention that one presupposes in one’s account<sup>3</sup>, but the bulk of Haugh’s argument seems to be that the understanding of intentions as “private mental states that are formulated before the performance of behavioural acts” (Gibbs, 1999:23) falls short of capturing the true nature of communication, which is more often than not dependent on a subconscious collaborative negotiation of meaning by the interactants themselves.

Even though the present account has also approached the evaluation of polite behaviour on the basis of intention recognition, it could still be upheld in a framework that views politeness as interactionally achieved. That is merely because the very notion of the Background is related to the discussion of intentionality rather than that of intention recognition per se, and as Haugh himself acknowledges, denying intention recognition its central role in pragmatics “should not be taken as a denial of the inherent directedness or aboutness of the inferential work underlying communication, and thus intentionality” (2009:107). After all, even if our communicative intentions are locally managed in interaction they still need to lead us to some determinate mental state, and the idea presented here is that the emergence of ‘shared’ or ‘collective’ intentionality in societal and linguistic groups can only help speed up this process.

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<sup>1</sup> For a representative explicit formulation of this view, see Brown (1995).

<sup>2</sup> For an earlier discussion along the same lines, see Haugh (2007b).

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