Politeness Principle in 2008 Presidential Debates between Mc Cain and Obama

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Abstract *This paper discusses "diplomatic language" with reference to linguistic theories, especially theories of pragmatics involving the Politeness Principle. In this paper the researcher tries to investigate the 3 presidential debates in 2008 between Senator Mc Cain and Obama. After checking the accuracy of transcripts against the videotape, the researcher through sentence by sentence analysis of the text, examines to what extent each candidate contributes more to Leech politeness maxims. The results of the paper show that in all three debates incident of maxim contribution is preceded by Obama. The researcher closes the paper with discussing the positive impact of these 6 maxims in face saving and group connectedness. She points to politeness maxims consideration as one of having crucial importance which helps diplomatic language to be more effective and successful.*

Key words: *diplomatic language; Leech maxims; politeness principle; 2008 presidential debates;*

1. Introduction

The writer first makes a survey of documents available, briefing the present study on the diplomatic language field as well as introducing the main theories in pragmatic study, including Politeness Principle, face and politeness strategy, as well as the shortcomings and limitations of these theories involving the Leech's Politeness Principle, Brown and Levinson's Face Saving Theory. Then the writer implements the analysis of the characteristics of the diplomatic language .Through the illustrations and analysis, the writer points out that negotiation and dialogue are playing such significant roles in present world that language matters a lot in diplomacy. In diplomatic language use , no matter what kind of specific linguistic strategy is taken, the purpose is either to reduce the face threat to "other" or to reduce the face threat to "self" or to both. In other words, the goal is either to maintain the face to "other" or to "self" or to both or all sides involved. Hence the politeness is neither so absolute nor so asymmetrical so far as the diplomatic language strategy is concerned. The writer concludes that the maxims under Politeness Principle are so asymmetrically other-oriented that it may not account for the features of diplomatic language.

In this paper the researcher chooses three presidential debates from 2008 political race between Mc Cain and Obama. She tries to investigate to what extent each of these candidates contribute to Leech politeness maxims. By comparing the incidence of contribution to such maxims the researcher wants to know which candidate is more concerned with face saving and group connectedness.

2. Literature review

2.1 Politeness Principle

In the book *Principles of Pragmatics* published in 1983, Leech (1983) defines politeness as forms of behavior that establish and maintain comity and he proposes what he terms "The Politeness Principle" as a way of explaining how politeness operates in conversational exchanges, indicating the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony. Leech's maxims of Politeness Principle are:

    I   TACT MAXIM
           (a) Minimize cost to *other* [(b) Maximize benefit to *other*]
    II   GENEROSITY MAXIM
           (a) Minimize benefit to *self* [(b) Maximize cost to *self*]
    III   APPROBATION MAXIM
           (a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]
    IV   MODESTY MAXIM
           (a) Minimize praise of *self* [(b) Maximize dispraise of *self*]

V   AGREEMENT MAXIM
          (a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*
          [(b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*]
VI   SYMPATHY MAXIM
          (a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*
          [(b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*]
          (Leech, 1983:132)

A Leech (1983) point out that it is not that all of the maxims and sub-maxims are equally important. Rather, of the twinned maxims (I)-(IV), (I) appears to be a more powerful constraint on conversational behavior than (II), and (III) than (IV). This reflects a more general law that politeness is focused more strongly on other than on self. Moreover, it is obvious that within each maxim, sub-maxim (b) seems to be less important than sub-maxim (a), which illustrates the more general law that negative politeness or avoidance of discord is a more weighty consideration than positive politeness or seeking concord.

Leech (1983: 112) compares the paradox of politeness with a comedy: "We may observe in the pragmatic paradoxes of politeness a comedy in inaction: it is as if two people are eternally prevented from passing through a doorway because each is too polite to go before the other."

Why does politeness manifest itself in this behavioral or pragmatic paradox? Leech (1983) says the answer to this appears somewhat paradoxical: the paradoxes of politeness function as an antidote to a more dangerous kind of paradox. It is epitomized in a situation in which each of the two persons wishing to go through the doorway attempts to go before the other, with the result that they collide in the doorway! Such paradoxes clearly lead to direct conflict, and are socially perilous. He perceives that the function of the Tact Maxim is a means of avoiding conflict.

Leech perceives that "politeness is essential asymmetrical: what is polite with respect to *h* or to some third party will be impolite with respect to *s*, and vice versa" (1983: 107).

Leech claims that PP can be seen not just as another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary complement, which rescues the CP from serious trouble.

2.2 Face and Politeness Strategies

Erving Goffman (1959: 208-12) was a professor at Berkeley and later at the University of Pennsylvania. He defines "Face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact", i.e. the image of the "self" that is presented. He illustrates some of the ways in which people present a face or image of the "self" in social relationships, interactions, and encounters. Goffman continues to develop similar ideas with a more systematic analysis of social interaction later on. He analyzes how we develop and present ourselves to others. For Goffman, the "self" is the individual's personal possession. But he also notes that it is social, it is given to the individual by others, and can be withdrawn by them. He thinks that in order to prevent the occurrence of incidents and the embarrassment, certain attributes are indispensable, and these attributes and practices "will be reviewed under three headings: the defensive measures used by performers to save their own show; the protective measures used by audience and outsiders to assist the performers in saving the performers' show; and, finally, the measures the performers must take in order to make it possible for the audience and outsiders to employ protective measures on the performers' behalf". The "performers" are equivalent to "self". Obviously, Goffman stresses the ways in which face of "self" tends to be maintained.

Perhaps the most thorough treatment of the concept of politeness in pragmatics is that of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978). The book is named *Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomenon*, which was first published in 1978 and then reissued in 1987. In the book Brown and Levinson (1978: 71-3) point out that face refers to a speaker's sense of linguistic and social identity. Any speech act may impose on this sense, and is therefore face threatening. And speakers have strategies for lessening the threat, especially to the hearer. That is where the significance of Politeness Principle lies. In their model, politeness is defined as redressive action taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect of face threatening acts (FTAs). In their theory, communication is seen as potentially dangerous and threatening. The basic term of their model is "face" which is defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" consisting of two related aspects. One is negative face, or the rights to territories, freedom of action and freedom from imposition, wanting your actions not to be constrained or inhibited by others. The other is positive face, which is consistent with the self-image that people have and want to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people. Positive politeness means being complimentary and gracious to the addressee (but if

this is overdone, the speaker may alienate the other party). Negative politeness is found in ways of mitigating the imposition. In the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. The speaker will want to minimize the threat of his FTA. The politeness theory of Brown and Levinson is also called "Face-saving Theory".

Brown and Levinson (1978) also argue that in human communication, either spoken or written, people tend to maintain one another's face continuously. In everyday conversation, we adapt our conversation to different situations. Among friends we take liberties or say things that would seem discourteous among strangers. And we avoid over-formality with friends. In both situations we try to avoid making the hearer embarrassed or uncomfortable. Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self-esteem. Politeness strategies are developed to deal with these FTAs. They stress that the basic strategy of politeness is to minimize the threat to an addressee's "negative face" and enhance their "positive face" as much as possible.

Grice's Cooperative Principle contributes a lot to pragmatic study of conversations between people, yet it is vulnerable to a certain extent so far as the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchanged is concerned. Will conversation between America and Iraq involve the accepted purpose or the consistent direction of talk exchange? In addition, what are the reasons for the violation or "flouting" of the maxims under the principle?

Apparently, it is a request, Brown and Levinson's Face Saving Theory is so influential that almost all discussions on politeness are based on their theory, yet it has some limitations, which are mainly:

1)   Brown and Levinson (1978) divide "face" into "positive face" and "negative face", and think that a certain speech act threatens only one of them for one time. However, some speech acts (such as orders or request) can simultaneously threaten two kinds of faces. For example a teacher speaks to a student:

"Would you please rewrite your essay however, it threatens both the positive face and negative face of the hearer. The speaker is not satisfied with the essay written by the hearer, which threatens the positive face of the hearer. The speaker requires that the hearer should write the essay again, thus interfering with the freedom of the hearer, which threatens the negative face of the hearer.

2)   Brown and Levinson mention that almost all the speech acts constitute face threatening, including invitation, compliment, gratitude, etc., which are not so acceptable. Assume that here comes an invitation that has been longed for by the recipient of the invitation letter; say an invitation of studying in a famous university with considerable scholarship. Is it a face threatening to the recipient?

Unquestionably, Leech's "Politeness Principle" contributes a lot to pragmatics study. However, the maximum shortcoming of it is insufficient consideration of the appropriateness of politeness. Leech (1983: 83) thinks that "some illocutions (e.g. orders) are inherently impolite, and others (e.g. offers) are inherently polite", which implies some speech acts are intrinsically polite or impolite, thus overlooking the context factor that may determine the level of politeness. Hence the appropriateness of politeness is ignored. Similarly, he holds that "Politeness is essential asymmetrical: what is polite with respect to *h* or to some third party will be impolite with respect to *s*, and vice versa"(Leech, 1983: 107), which is not always the case, rather, the politeness can be even-handed, as shown in the examples in the following chapter. Moreover, in stating the maxims of the Politeness Principle, the word "maximize" and "minimize" are obviously going to extremes. The context is not sufficiently weighted anyway. Some typical examples cited in Chapter 4 will show how diplomatic language works in reconciling the asymmetry.

It can be seen that Leech's Politeness Principle is too absolute and ideal. It is "other" oriented and neglects "self". New ideas are to be proposed into the Politeness Principle, including strengthening the harmonic relations between each side and taking related politeness strategies, which may include 1) pay attention to 'self', 2) respect 'other', 3) consider 'third party'. In a word, the relativity of politeness is to be dealt with appropriately. The view that the true nature of politeness is the relativity, which determines the appropriateness of politeness in different occasions, is to be taken into consideration regarding the relative context. The relativity of politeness reveals itself in various ways, which cannot be overlooked. Since the "absoluteness" in politeness is relative whereas the "relativity" of it is absolute, Leech's Politeness Principle may not cover all the requirements of the polite language. Though it is proposed to "rescue" the Cooperative Principle, it may solve only part of the questions that are unsolved by the Cooperative Principle.

In summary, the major weakness of "Face Saving Theory" and "Politeness Principle" is that they emphasize (along with speech act theory) single turn or utterance as primary to face-work. Their overemphasis on hearer's face (at expense of speaker's face) overlooks the appropriateness in language strategy. Much face-work is negotiated and coordinated

over a series of moves or actions. Face-work can be missed if it focuses only on a single turn. Sometimes, especially in diplomatic language strategy, face of "self" is as important as that of "other", or even more important on some specific occasions, which is determined by requirements of diplomacy and features of diplomatic language. Moreover, diplomatic language strategy is also prevalent in people's lives because people will take "face" or "interest" into consideration in their everyday activities. In this sense, diplomatic language strategy is worthy of analysis and discussion.

2.3 Politeness Theory and Presidential Debates

In the field of diplomacy, politeness prevails in diplomatic language and behavior as a whole. Diplomats are supposed to have decent manners and not to resort to personal attacks on any occasion. Being the representatives of their own country, diplomats and statesmen have the holy duty to protect their countries' interests, avoid conflicts between countries and maintain good relations with other countries. Therefore, both politeness and competence are needed for diplomacy. Politeness reflects the social distance in the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Suppose both sides are of equal position, generally, the more intimate, the less polite; the less intimate, and the more polite. As a phenomenon existing for a very long time, diplomacy is formal, conservative, persuasive, cautious and, polite and tactful. So indirectness is one important strategy in diplomatic language.

While politenesss research focused mainly on dyadic interaction some studies have moved beyond dydic context in an attempt to assess how audiences perceive a speakers politeness. Myers (1989) has considered the complex situation where an audience of readers might respond to the politeness evident in scientific articles and in small group context of scientific collaboration (Myers, 1991); Obeng(1997) studied politeness strategies in Akan juditial discourse ;and Wilson (1992) has applied a politeness model to Pauls letter to Philemon.

Recently, debates scholars have started to pursue studies that assess candidate's image formation as it develops out of interactive clash. Benoit and Wells (1996) developed the claim that candidates' images are at stake in debates .Similarly Becks (1996) study of 1992 vice presidential debate argued that a candidate's social face was at stake in a debate and that the candidates ability to manage turn taking affected what the audiences perception of the candidates.

How candidates argue is an important if not more so than what they argue about.

According to Beck (1996)," candidate's capacity to present themselves during such consequential public interactions (as debates) hinges on their interactional skills, not just their ability to look a certain way or say particular things. This critical factor in political communication merits exploration"(p.166).

Our belief is that debates are a special type of social situation where candidates are required to disagree in ways that persuade audiences to perceive them favorably. In short, candidates are expected to project a favorable political image-positive face-in a context that calls for face threatening acts. Cognizant of the fact that audience members are carefully scrutinizing each language choice for clues concerning presidential ability ,candidates must calculate what constitutes an appropriate strategy in the attack and defense of competing political images before, during and sometimes after a debate(when other debates scheduled in a campaign). In these highly charged, competitive situations, social face must be managed carefully before an audience of voters who are observing for the purpose of judging each candidate's ability to sense the appropriate strategy at each point in transaction. In these respects, chieces regarding politeness strategies might be one way to measure a candidate's good will and judgement regarding his image, his opponents and the values he aspires to represent for the community. These qualities represent important aspect of political leadership and are assessed by the audiences in debates (Hinck, 1993).

3. Methodology

3.1 Debates

The three presidential debates:
- Friday, September 26, 2008, 9 p.m. EDT at the University of Mississippi's Gertrude C. Ford Center in Oxford, Mississippi, moderated by Jim Lehrer, executive editor and anchor of *The NewsHour* on PBS. This debate was originally planned to focus on foreign policy and national security. Due to the 2008 financial crisis, a portion of the debate focused on economic issues.
- Tuesday, October 7, 2008, 9 p.m. EDT at Belmont University's Curb Event Center in Nashville ,Tennessee, moderated by Tom Brokaw, special correspondent and former evening news anchor for NBC News. This debate had a town hall meeting format.

- Wednesday, October 15, 2008, 9 p.m. EDT at Hofstra University's Hofstra Arena in Hempstead, New York, moderated by Bob Schieffer, CBS News chief Washington correspondent and host of *Face the Nation*. This debate focused on domestic and economic policy.

The first and third of the 90-minute CPD presidential debates were divided into nine 9-minute issue segments, allowing the candidates to discuss selected topics, answer follow-ups from the moderator and directly address each other. The second CPD presidential debate featured a town hall format in which voters, either present at the debate or via the internet, posed questions on a topic of their choice. The format of the single vice presidential debate followed that of the first and third presidential debates, but included questions on all topics, with shorter response and discussion periods compared to the presidential debates.

3.2 Participants

The Republican nominees were *Senator John McCain*, and Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. The Democratic nominees were Senators *Barack Obama* and Joseph Biden. The debates were sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates. Here in this paper we focus on debates between Obama and Mc Cain.

3.3 Procedure

First the researcher tries to check the accuracy of transcripts against the videotapes of 3 presidential debates. She tries to have a neat sentence by sentence analysis of the transcripts against the use of politeness strategies. As it is mentioned in review part, we mentioned 6 politeness maxims presented by Leech (1983). The researcher tries to investigate to what extent each of two candidate contribute to these 6 politeness maxims. By providing the percentage incidents of their happenings in transcripts, the researcher wants to know which candidate, Mc Cain or Obama, contributes more to politeness maxims.

4. Results

Table 1 show to what extent each candidate contributes to Tact maxim. This maxim relate to the reality that when we minimize benefit to ourselves and maximize benefit to others we are more concerned to politeness principle, and connectedness to group and others is more important issue for us. The results of table 1 show that Obama proceeds to Mc Cain in contributing to Tact maxim in all 3 presidential debates.

Table 1. Incidents of Tact Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	32	30	22
Obama	50	41	38

Table 2 show to what extent the two candidates contribute to Generosity Maxim. According to this maxim we minimize the benefit to ourselves and maximize the cost to ourselves. The results show again for this case Obama precedes Mc Cain. So Obama with resorting to this maxim seems more contributed to politeness principle.

Table 2. Incidents of Generosity Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	12	25	19
Obama	35	34	43

Table 3 show to what extent the two candidates contribute to Approbation Maxim. This maxim presents the issue that as we minimize dispraise of others and we maximize praise and admiration of others. In this case except in debate one in which Mc Cain precedes in using this maxim, in other two debates Obama contributes more to this maxim.

Table 3. Incidents of Approbation Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	32	13	26
Obama	31	25	41

Table 4 shows to what extent participants contribute to Modesty Maxim, in which participants try to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. The results show both candidates in very little extent contribute to this maxim. But here again Obama in all three debates contribute more to this maxim.

Table 4. Incidents of Modesty Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	8	4	3
Obama	15	6	9

Table 5 show to what extent participants contribute more to Agreement maxim which put emphasis on Minimizing disagreement between self and other and Maximizing agreement between self and other. In all three debates Obama precedes in contributing more to this maxim.

Table 5. Incidents of Agreement Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	30	18	28
Obama	32	25	34

Table 6 show to what extent the two candidates contribute to Sympathy Maxim. This maxim considers the issue of Minimizing antipathy between self and other Maximizing sympathy between self and other. Again in this case Obama considers this maxim while talking more.

Table 6. Incidents of Sympathy Maxim as % of candidates/debates

	Debate 1	Debate 2	Debate 3
Mc Cain	15	19	38
Obama	32	24	40

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate to what extent 2008 presidential candidates contributed to politeness principle. The researcher investigated the incidence of contribution to politeness maxims. The results showed that Obama in all 3 debated proceeded in maxim contribution and also contribution to politeness principle. The results of 2008 presidential race in which Obama finally won the game, support what Hinck (1993) reports in his study, that qualities like contribution to cooperative principle or politeness principle represent important aspects of political leadership and are assessed by the audiences in debates .The results also are in accordance with what Myers (1989) discussed in his study.

He has considered the complex situation where an audience of readers might respond to the politeness evident in scientific articles in small group context of scientific collaboration. He considered politeness principle as a crucial factor which contributes to the candidates face in debates.

Since the significance of "diplomacy" or "diplomatic language strategy" consists in maintaining good relations among nations, dialogue and negotiation are playing more and more important roles in the present world. Therefore language matters a lot in diplomacy. The maxims under Politeness Principle are so asymmetrically other-oriented that it may not account for the features of diplomatic language. It can only solve part of the problems that are unsolved by the Cooperative Principle. Therefore the concise tact maxim of Leech's Politeness Principle, which is "minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other", can be adjusted to be an "Interest Principle" in diplomatic language strategy: "Minimize cost to others, maximize benefit to *self*", which is a parallel and simultaneous process. They are premises to each other based on specific conditions. In addition, "others" indicates not only the hearer, but all the parties involved. It really looks another paradox, yet a trade-off is possible so far as the diplomacy is concerned.

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Note*

You can see full transcripts of three presidential debates and their videos on this page:
http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/third-presidential-debate.html