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WHY IT MATTERS HOW YOU SAY IT

All language users communicate at least four levels of meaning in any given utterance: content, function, textual meaning, and social meaning. In this study I investigated a particular area of social meaning in ASL and English: the linguistic expression of politeness. The data from the ASL and English versions of the discourse completion test (DCT) reveal general trends regarding specific linguistic strategies used by ASL signers and English speakers when making requests and rejections. Although the ASL signers may use more direct and involvement-oriented strategies at times when English speakers may use more indirect and independence-oriented strategies, both language groups use many similar strategies. In addition, each language group uses some language-specific strategies.

One of the goals of this study was to determine whether or not ASL signers use a variety of strategies in the mitigation of speech acts because it was not clear in the literature that ASL signers use any strategy other than directness (except for some examples from Roush, 1999, and Valli, Lucas, & Mulrooney, 2005). Indirect speech acts in ASL were especially in question. The DCT results show that ASL signers do use a variety of strategies in making requests and rejections. Although the English speakers make indirect requests in only the “requesting the employee complete a big project much earlier than expected” (+P, +R) context, none of the ASL signers make such indirect requests. The only instance of an indirect request in the ASL DCT data is a joke. On the other hand, both ASL signers and English speakers make indirect rejections, especially in difficult (+R) rejections. The use of indirect rejections by ASL signers and the joke (as an indirect request) by one ASL signer provides

empirical evidence that ASL signers indeed use, at least, these two types of indirect speech acts.

This investigation is important because how an interlocutor says something can result in possible misinterpretation, negative perceptions, and perpetuation of stereotypes. Cross-cultural communication can be improved with the understanding that more than one kind of politeness is at work in face-to-face interaction. Therefore, the results of the current study have implications for interactional sociolinguistics and cross-cultural studies, as well as for ASL instruction and ASL/English interpretation.

Misinterpreting Another's Way of Speaking— Moving Away From Stereotyping

Learning a particular way of speaking is part of one's acquisition of a language and becoming a full member of a language community. That is to say, people learn to express themselves in socially appropriate ways. When encountering the utterances of those who use the same way of speaking, addressees generally know how to interpret the various levels of meaning, including the social meaning, of those utterances, and the discourse usually flows naturally. However, speakers also encounter language communities that have quite different ways of speaking.

When interlocutors' politeness strategies differ, there may be one of three results. First, the addressee may misinterpret the speaker by interpreting the speaker's meaning (social or otherwise) based on the addressee's way of speaking. Second, the addressee may judge the speaker harshly and may reject the speaker as being either too forward or too evasive. Third, the addressee may recognize the speaker as an outsider who has a different way of speaking, and either attempt to understand communicative differences or discount the speaker as a deviant who does not know how to interact well with others.

These first impressions are made quickly and often without much thought. One's way of speaking marks someone as either an insider or an outsider, showing that differences in politeness strategies are interpreted as having a social meaning.

An increased awareness of how people express themselves in different contexts is an important first step in reducing the misinterpretation of social meaning and the subsequent judging, misinterpreting, or discounting of speakers that can occur in cross-cultural communication. For example, it is helpful for ASL signers to recognize that English-speaking supervisors may use indirect requests when making a difficult (+R) request. This is an example where an ASL signer may misinterpret the supervisor's request and may judge the supervisor to be unnecessarily vague or uncooperative.

Likewise, the judging of ASL signers as too direct, which appears to be a folk stereotype, may be used as a way to discount this linguistic minority. The evidence from the ASL DCT provides evidence that ASL signers, in fact, are not always direct. Although at times they were more likely to engage in direct requests and direct rejections apparently due to different cultural expectations, they in fact engage in a variety of strategies to mitigate threats to face, and many of these strategies are similar to those of English speakers. In addition, the use of indirect rejections by the ASL signers in the DCT data provides strong counterevidence to the prevailing view that ASL signers do not use indirect strategies. This is not to say that ASL signers and English speakers do not differ in their ways of speaking; there are actually many differences. The function of nonmanual modifiers (NMMs) to mitigate threats to face, in particular, seems to have been overlooked. Nonetheless, this multidimensional investigation of differences helps move the focus away from a dichotomy based on one dimension. By using multiple dimensions, researchers can more accurately characterize the complexity of language use among the members of each language community.

It's *How* You Say It

Cross-linguistic differences can be better understood by looking at three possible levels of analysis: cultural, discourse style, and interaction. Some trends may be made about cultural dimensions that affect the linguistic tendencies of a linguistic community, and trends may also be made about discourse styles. However, it is the inter-

actional level of analysis that provides evidence regarding how linguistic devices are used in their complexity by language users in changing day-to-day interactions, and it is this level that has been the focus of this book.

There is no question that people alter the way they express themselves depending on the context they are in. The data presented here show that at the level of face-to-face interaction, both ASL signers and English speakers use politeness strategies that reveal that they consider both involvement and independence in making requests and rejections. For example, when supervisors make requests or rejections of subordinates, they use certain strategies depending on the perceived supervisor-employee (+P) relationship and the relative weight of the threat to involvement or independence. When supervisors are with their colleagues (other supervisors), they may use different strategies, and when addressing their own superiors, they make different linguistic choices. At the interactional level of analysis, we see the dynamic use of language to maintain face, and the interlocutors' relationship, within the social context of the interaction.

A language community's expectations and perceptions regarding the mitigation of threats to involvement and independence reflect a way of interacting that is unique to that community. Indeed, to express oneself contrary to the community's expectations is to mark oneself as an outsider.

Using an interactional approach and a politeness framework, the current study reveals that there are strong tendencies regarding the mitigation of requests and rejections based on the relative weight of the imposition. These correspond to the variables of ranking of imposition and to some degree, power relations. However, the variable of social distance was controlled in this study, as this factor has been the most disputed in the literature, especially the dimensions of familiarity and affect, and the dimension of liking in particular (Kasper, 1990; Meyer, 1994).

More face-work is generally expected for those speech acts that are ranked as being more difficult (+R) and in which the speaker is in a lower power position (-P). This is indeed the case in the DCT

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data. In contrast, the supervisor (+P) uses fewer politeness strategies, and overall, fewer strategies are used to mitigate easy (–R) requests and rejections. Consider the two employee (–P) requests, which are signed by the same ASL signer, in Examples 1 and 2:

1. **Context: An employee (E) asks a supervisor to pass one’s pen.**

E: INDEX/tight lips, MY #PEN/(wondering), DON’T-MIND GIVE-ME, DON’T-MIND GIVE-ME/tight lips,q.

[*translation: I think that’s my pen. Do you mind—Do you mind handing it to me?*]

2. **Context: An employee (E) in a grocery store asks the supervisor for the day before Thanksgiving off.**

E: I/pg, POSSIBLE I WEDNESDAY INDEX-RIGHT+/t, POSSIBLE, IF CAN/cond, OFF I INDEX-RIGHT WEDNESDAY, “WELL”(1-hand)/tight lips /q. SUPPOSE YOU HAVE-TO/pg,cond, I WILLING/pp. YOU HAVE OTHER PEOPLE COVER ME, “WELL”/tight lips(1-hand, nondominant hand, move forward) /q, POSSIBLE, “WELL”(some circular movement)/(slight rocking)bt /tight lips,q.

[*translation: I—is it possible for me to have this Wednesday off, you think? If you say I have to work, I’ll do that (of course). Perhaps someone could cover for me, or something? So is that a possibility at all?*]

These two examples are markedly different, and demonstrate some uses of the politeness strategies reported in this study. Example 1 shows use of the sign DON’T-MIND, the *tight lips* marker, and a question form. Example 2 shows use of the sign POSSIBLE (hedging); four different NMMs: *pg*, *bt*, and *tight lips* during the head request, and *pp* during the offer/promise strategy; the give deference strategy (SUPPOSE YOU HAVE-TO/pg,cond, I WILLING/pp); an offer/promise (YOU HAVE OTHER PEOPLE COVER ME, “WELL”/tight lips(1-hand, non-dominant hand, move forward) /q); as well as the use of the question form in the head request.

In most cases, one would not expect the politeness strategies used in Example 2, a difficult (+R) request, to be used in an easy (-R) request, such as Example 1. The implication would be that there was a great threat to face, which seems unlikely in such a request. In a typical context in which an employee is asking a supervisor to pass the employee's pen, the extensive face-work would seem extreme and would imply that something more is at stake.

Conversely, if one uses the politeness strategies used in an easy (-R) request, such as Example 1, in a context in which there is a perceived greater threat to face, the addressee may be offended or may wonder why the signer is making light of the request. In other words, the lack of face-work on the signer's part would imply that the content and function were taking precedent over the social meaning and the mitigation of the larger threat to independence. Example 3 shows what this type of incongruous request might look like, i.e., if an employee were to do little face-work when making a difficult (+R) request.

3. **Context: An employee (E) in a grocery store asks the supervisor for the day before Thanksgiving off.**

E: WEDNESDAY, DAY BEFORE THANKSGIVING/t, DON'T-MIND, OFF, I/pp.q.

[translation: Do you mind if I have the day before Thanksgiving off?]

All of the native ASL signers engage in more face-work (e.g., use more severe NMMs) in this difficult (+R) rejection made by the employee than appears in this example. Clearly the appropriate and expected face-work is not being conveyed in this example. The supervisor would wonder why the employee is presuming to make light of such a big imposition, especially given that the *pp* marker (which is used only for small threats to involvement) is being used to make a difficult (+R) request.

When it comes to social meaning and the linguistic expression of politeness, what matters is not only what language users say, but how they say it. Human beings are not only conveying content, function, and textual meaning in interaction, they are also maintaining an image

of themselves and their relationship with others; they are conveying social meaning. The linguistic decisions they make, which are generally made unconsciously, provide the glue that helps maintain our social interactions.

Two Kinds of Face Politeness Systems, Not One

When most people in the United States think of politeness, they tend to think of the traditional view of politeness as it is expressed in books on etiquette. This social norm view of politeness reflects a prescriptive view of polite behavior and, therefore, may assume that a polite way of speaking is more akin to independence, in that the speaker does not want to impede the addressee's wants, actions, and values. When it comes to linguistic politeness, however, speakers often mitigate threats to both involvement and independence. Involvement, when the speaker affirms the addressee's wants, actions, and values as desirable, reaffirms the relationship between the interlocutors and a sense of solidarity and connectedness. Whereas linguistic communities may be more independence-oriented or involvement-oriented; in actuality, both kinds of face-needs are mitigated in face-to-face interaction.

The general lack of awareness of the involvement politeness system (at least in the majority culture of the United States) is unfortunate. As has been suggested in this book, some language communities, such as the American Deaf community, assume involvement as the predominant face politeness system, where acceptance in common membership takes precedence over independence. The implication of this cultural tendency is that there may be less concern with threats to independence.

This difference in expectations regarding independence and involvement is reflected in some comments made by English speakers. For example, some English speakers have said that ASL signers do not say "please" and "thank you" enough. This criticism seems to be based on differing cultural expectations regarding the linguistic expression of politeness. Given that independence (characterized by the desire to not impose or assume the addressee will agree) is

the predominant face politeness system in the majority culture, these English speakers may well be assuming an independence face politeness system and judging those who do not conform to their expectations.

ASL signers, in fact, do use the signs, PLEASE and THANK-YOU, among themselves at times to mitigate threats to independence. Both of these signs appear in the ASL data in this study. However, it is likely that ASL signers are using PLEASE and THANK-YOU the Deaf way and not in the specific contexts that some English speakers would expect to hear the words, *please* and *thank you*, in everyday usage. It would also follow that PLEASE and THANK-YOU would be used less often in a linguistic community that operates primarily under the involvement face politeness system because the degree to which these signs are used may well be lessened by the general assumption of cooperation and common membership.

Some English speakers also have said that ASL signers don't say, "you're welcome," enough as well. In actuality, expressions such as THANK-YOU or FINE+ [*That's fine*], often marked by the *pp* marker or the *tight lips* NMM—rather than YOU WELCOME—are used in ASL as a response to the act of thanking. A nodding of the head, often marked with either the *pp* or *tight lips* NMM, is also a common marker used in the language for this purpose.

The difference in face politeness systems may also account for why some ASL signers say that English speakers (hearing people) BE-VAGUE (*are vague* or *are indirect*). There may well be many contexts in which English speakers say things in a more roundabout way by using more face-work than many ASL signers (Deaf people) would expect at that moment in the interaction. The use of indirect requests by English speakers certainly attests to such a difference in difficult (+R) requests by the supervisor (+P). In addition, ASL signers—using the involvement face politeness system—may use more of a deductive rhetorical strategy (topic-first), even more than English speakers.

Scollon and Scollon (2001) have suggested that Americans tend to use a deductive (topic-first) rhetorical strategy; however, when American ASL signers are compared to American English speakers,

ASL signers may have more of a preference for this rhetorical strategy than do American English speakers. The use of the deductive rhetorical strategy is a matter of degree, and the attribution to any particular group may depend in part on what groups are being compared. The stereotyping regarding their different ways of speaking as direct or indirect also seems to be based on this dichotomy, which—like most stereotypes—has some basis in fact.

Holding a more independence oriented view of linguistic politeness may actually blind some people to the strategies used by a member of a community that is more involvement oriented. The recognition of two types of face politeness systems and the strategies used to mitigate them is an important contribution of the face-saving view to politeness. It provides a framework for better understanding the range of strategies that are employed by particular language users at the level of face-to-face interaction.

Future Research

The findings presented here clarify how these two groups of language users manage requests and rejections. Although this study has helped to clarify many of these issues, future research is needed in at least three related areas.

First, more research is needed regarding the politeness strategies used by a variety of signed language users. These include signers of other signed languages, second language users of ASL (especially considering the findings of the pilot study reported in chapter 7), and ASL signers of various dialects, including blue-collar (grass-roots) ASL signers and ASL signers who differ in their ethnicity, race, gender, and regional backgrounds. More research is also needed regarding various dialects of English, second language users of English, and other spoken languages.

Second, use of politeness strategies in settings other than the workplace should be researched. Research into casual conversations, medical appointments, the classroom setting, or other settings should help reveal how requests and rejections are handled differently as determined in part by the speech event, sociolinguistic dif-

ferences, and variables that determine the weight of the imposition: power, social distance, and ranking.

Third, researchers need to investigate how ASL signers mitigate other speech acts, such as complaints, compliments, and so on. There is a particular need for empirical investigation into the mitigation of other speech acts by second language users of ASL and signers of various ASL dialects.

Implications

The findings reported here have implications for interactional sociolinguistics and cross-cultural studies, as well for ASL instruction and ASL/English interpretation. First, regarding sociolinguistic and cross-cultural studies, it is important when developing a DCT for a comparative language study to verify similar expectations for the contexts by the two language groups, as was done in this study. In addition, when administering a DCT, the ranking of the discourse contexts by the participants before the elicitation of linguistic data is important for accurate analysis and interpretation of the data.

Second, the findings of the DCT in this study show that these language users employ many well-documented politeness strategies (e.g., politeness strategies proposed by Brown & Levinson, 1987) to mitigate requests and rejections, and, in addition, use some distinct language forms (e.g., NMMs, “HANDWAVE,” naming, and surprise expressions). This study provides new findings that can contribute to the understanding of cross-linguistical politeness strategies. In particular, the recognition of NMMs (Roush, 1999) reveals the unique nature of ASL in using nonmanual features to mitigate speech acts, which may be unique to signed languages. It is important for studies that involve a signed language to attend to such nonmanual features.

The implications for ASL instruction and ASL/English interpretation are threefold. First, the area of politeness is not generally taught in ASL or interpreter education programs. If such differences are currently addressed in the curriculum, they are usually attributed to cross-cultural differences in general. The findings of the current study, the face-saving view of politeness, and the approach used in

the cross-linguistic study presented here (especially determining the weight of the imposition by considering power, social distance, and ranking of imposition) can provide educators with an approach to educate students and interpreters about this specific area of language usage.

Second, ASL instructors should be concerned about the competence of their students in terms of expressing social meaning as well as content, function, and textual meaning. The findings presented here show that there are certain aspects of social meaning that are integral to ASL instruction and to the goal of fostering pragmatic competence in second language users of ASL. For interpreters, an awareness of these four levels of meaning is also key to effective interpretation, as all four levels of meaning are conveyed in every interpreted interaction.

Third, ASL/English interpreters may focus on interpreting a speaker's meaning as text (as though it were a monologue) and may, therefore, overlook important features of face-to-face interaction in their interpretations (see Hoza, 1999; Metzger, 1999; Roy, 2000a, 2000b; Wadensjö, 1998). ASL/English interpreters need to understand the politeness strategies used by ASL signers and English speakers because they make decisions regarding how to convey speakers' politeness strategies (their social meaning) in interpreted interaction. How these strategies are rendered by the interpreter could have a profound effect on the interaction and how the primary speakers perceive each other as participants.

Having proficiency in a language, whether the language is a first or second language, involves competence in one's ability to alter language usage to accommodate different social contexts. People convey their intent, their social images, and their view of the relationship by the language choices they make. These levels of language usage guide how an addressee construes a speaker's social meaning, and yet language users usually interpret these powerful messages unconsciously. Given that these linguistic decisions are based on social factors that lie beneath the surface of every interaction, every face-to-face encounter involves some consideration of politeness concerns.

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A major barrier to successful cross-cultural communication is to take for granted a stereotype about another person's way of speaking based on one or two dimensions of that group's language usage. Although ASL signers and English speakers may lean toward certain strategies, the empirical findings presented here challenge a limited view of these two language groups. ASL signers and English speakers, like all language users, employ a rich variety of strategies in interaction at any given moment. In short,

DEAF/t, BE-DIRECT, BE-VAGUE, *BOTH!* HEARING/t, BE-VAGUE,
BE-DIRECT, *BOTH!*

[*translation: Deaf people are both direct and indirect, and hearing (non-Deaf) people are both indirect and direct*].

An awareness of this fact is one step away from stereotyping and a step toward understanding ways of speaking that may differ from one's own.