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Politeness strategies in a Mesoamerican language isolate: The case of P'urhepecha

ABSTRACT: Linguistic politeness has been a topic of inquiry for a number of years now, yet to date there exist many languages that have scarcely been considered in this endeavor. One of them is P'urhepecha (also known as Tarascan), a Mesoamerican isolate, still spoken by more than 124,000 people in Mexico. Given that speakers of different languages possess different means of expressing politeness, it is crucial to investigate the particular politeness strategies speakers resort to in specific languages in order to further our understanding of the social functions of language. Thus, this article presents a study of some of the main politeness strategies found in P'urhepecha, with a comparison to similar strategies in Spanish, including the use of formal pronouns and enclitics, and verbal tenses such as the future and the conditional. Ultimately, the comparison between such typologically divergent languages, P'urhepecha and Spanish, can shed light on the universality of theories of linguistic politeness.

KEYWORDS: Linguistic politeness; P'urhepecha; Mesoamerica; Language isolate; Spanish.

RESUMEN: Aunque la cortesía lingüística ha sido un tema de investigación desde hace varios años, todavía existen muchos idiomas que han sido escasamente considerados en esos estudios; uno de ellos es el purépecha, lengua mesoamericana aislada que aún se habla en México por más de 124,000 personas. Dado que los hablantes de diferentes idiomas poseen distintos medios para expresar la cortesía, es crucial investigar las estrategias específicas de cortesía de los hablantes de distintas lenguas y de ese modo acrecentar nuestro conocimiento de las funciones sociales del lenguaje. Así, este trabajo representa un estudio de las principales estrategias de cortesía en purépecha, comparándolas con estrategias similares del español; por ejemplo, el uso de pronombres de respeto, enclíticos pronominales, y tiempos verbales como el futuro y el condicional. Además, la comparación de estos dos idiomas tan distantes tipológicamente puede contribuir a esclarecer la posible universalidad de teorías relacionadas con la cortesía lingüística.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cortesía lingüística; Purépecha; Mesoamérica; Lengua aislada; Español.

1. Introduction¹

Analyses of the pragmatic features of the languages of Mesoamerica do not abound. The great grammatical complexity and morphological intricacies of these languages have caught the attention of many scholars and inspired many studies of such matters, yet studies of topics such as politeness are undoubtedly more difficult to come by. Linguistic politeness has been a topic of inquiry for a number of years now, yet to date there are still multiple languages that have scarcely been considered in this endeavor. One such language is P'urhepecha, also known as Tarascan, one of the approximately sixty eight indigenous languages still spoken in Mexico (INALI 2010). It is the language of the P'urhepecha people, who originally inhabited an area covering significant portions of the states of Michoacán and Guanajuato, and also parts of Guerrero and Jalisco in present day Mexico. The P'urhepecha were never conquered by the Aztecs and over time were able to develop quite an advanced civilization. Even though it is still spoken at present by more than 124,000 people,² there are various aspects of P'urhepecha, including politeness, that have yet to be addressed in a significant way. Fortunately, studies focusing on P'urhepecha are increasing, in addition to the few treatises dealing with this most intricate language that already exist, some of which come to us courtesy of the friars of the colonial period (Gilberti 1987 [1558]; Basalenque 1962 [1714]; Lagunas 1983 [1574]; Foster 1969; Chamoreau 2003).

P'urhepecha represents what linguists call a language isolate, a language with no known relatives among the languages of the world. There are only a handful of languages today that fit this description, a fact that makes their study all the more significant, especially given the fact that many are endangered and facing an uncertain future. Furthermore, as it is often the case, linguistic theories, including the theory of politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987), have been applied for the most part to Western European languages, especially English, yet the study of other so-called "exotic" languages can help us in discerning the role played by culture, society, and the environment in the structuring of language.

Ide (1989: 225) defines politeness as: "the language usage associated with smooth communication, realized 1) through the speaker's use of intentional strategies to allow his or her message to be received favorably by the addressee, and 2) through the speaker's choice of expressions to conform to the expected and/or prescribed norms of speech appropriate to the contextual situation in individual speech communities." Given that speakers of different languages possess a variety of different means for expressing politeness, it is fundamental to investigate the particular politeness strategies that speakers resort to in specific languages as a significant means to further our understanding of the social functions of language.

¹ My most sincere thanks to L. Gómez Bravo (formerly at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo) and E. Estrada Bacilio, who have provided me with invaluable insights into diverse aspects of the P'urhepecha language.

² Mexico's INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía) reports 124, 494 P'urhepecha speakers as of the year 2010.

Thus, this article explores some of the main politeness strategies found in P'urhepecha, including a brief comparison to similar strategies in Spanish,³ as a basic approximation to the topic of politeness in this particular Mesoamerican language. The discussion is intended as a bridge between theory and empirical data and as a way of contributing to fill the existing void in the linguistic literature with respect to this kind of semantic-pragmatic study in the field of Mesoamerican languages.⁴ One theory that has proven highly influential over the years in the analysis of politeness phenomena is Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness. Thus, taking Brown and Levinson's and others' seminal work (cf. Lakoff 1973, 1980) on linguistic politeness as a theoretical platform, I analyze some of the principal linguistic mechanisms through which politeness is expressed in P'urhepecha; for instance, strategies involving indirectness and mitigation through grammatical means, as realized through the use of certain verbal tenses, such as the conditional and the future, as well as the system of pronominal reference, which includes pronouns and enclitics. These clearly exemplify the ways in which grammatical structures encode considerations of social relations and social interaction, signaling that matters of politeness are being taken into account when addressing others. Furthermore, the comparison presented here between two typologically very different languages, P'urhepecha and Spanish, can contribute to shed some light on the universality of theories of linguistic politeness.

2. The P'urhepecha language

P'urhepecha can be described typologically as a suffixating, agglutinative language, and it has a system of cases, including genitive, objective, and locative. Most words are morphologically complex containing a stem and several bound suffixes of different types, both inflectional and derivational. This language distinguishes itself due to a profuse inventory of body part suffixes⁵ that constitute an integral and obligatory component of its grammatical expression of spatial relationships and location (Friedrich 1971; Monzón 2004; Mendoza 2012). P'urhepecha communities may be divided into four major areas: The Lake Pátzcuaro region or *región lacustre*, the Tarascan Plateau or *meseta tarasca*, the Ravine of the Eleven Towns or *Cañada de los Once Pueblos*, and the Zacapu "swamp" region or *Ciénega de Zacapu*, all of them in the state of Michoacán. The dialect of P'urhepecha under consideration here can be related mainly to that of the Tarascan Plateau or *meseta tarasca*.

³ This study, however, does not focus on contact between Spanish and P'urhepecha; rather, it refers to expressions of politeness in P'urhepecha monolingual usage.

⁴ One of the scarce studies that deals with politeness in a Mesoamerican language is: Hill and Hill's (1978) "Honorific usage in Modern Nahuatl: The expression of social distance and respect in the Nahuatl of the Malinche Volcano area." Another study is Schrader-Kniffki's (2004) "Speaking Spanish with Zapotec meaning: Requests and promises in intercultural communication in Oaxaca, Mexico," but this particular work deals with communication in bilingual settings, not with monolingual usage.

⁵ P'urhepecha possesses about thirty two locative suffixes (Friedrich 1971: 12).

3. Politeness strategies in P'urhepecha⁶

As Evans (2010: 77) explains, “the various types of social relationship impact on conversations and shape the way utterances are framed, something that many languages index grammatically through various types of politeness or respect markers.” P'urhepecha is among these languages. Thus, in what follows, some of the main politeness strategies that exist in P'urhepecha involving various forms of address and its system of verbal tenses will be discussed, with special attention given to requests.

3.1. Forms of address (formal vs. informal)

One of the most direct means to express politeness in P'urhepecha is the formality distinction that exists in its pronominal system of address where one of its plural pronouns is used for singular reference. The language possesses the following subject pronouns:

1 st person singular:	<i>ji</i> ⁷
2 nd person singular:	<i>t'u</i>
3 rd person singular:	<i>ima</i>
1 st person plural:	<i>jucha</i>
2 nd person plural:	<i>cha</i> (<i>ch'a</i> in some dialects)
3 rd person plural:	<i>ts'ima/imecha</i> (<i>ts'ima</i> in some dialects)

As is the case in many other languages (the Romance languages are a well-known example), in P'urhepecha the 2nd person plural subject pronoun is also used for polite reference for 2nd person singular. Thus, a contrast is established between the formal, polite pronoun *cha*, which signals deference and respect, and the informal, familiar pronoun *t'u*. According to Campbell et al. (1986: 558), some other languages of Mesoamerica with a grammaticalized formality contrast in second-person address are Nahuatl, Mam, Aguacatec, Ixil, and Mixtec. Given that in P'urhepecha all verbal forms for 1st and 2nd persons, both singular and plural, are identical,⁸ it is the presence of one or the other second-person pronoun which crucially determines whether the speaker intends her utterance as polite or not when addressing a single interlocutor. We should also note that there is no formality distinction for second person plural.

The contexts of use of *cha* and *t'u* are also similar to those in other languages that exhibit the T/V distinction in second person reference. Whereas *t'u* is consistently employed to address children, animals, and pets, *cha* tends to appear in the following general contexts: When addressing people with a high status in the community (such as the members of the elders/town's council or religious and civil authorities, e.g. priests, the town's mayor, etc.), members of prestigious professions (doctors, lawyers, professors), adult strangers or unfamiliar persons, old people (or people older than oneself), as well as God, the Virgin and the saints. In this regard, it is to be noted that a prominent feature of P'urhepecha culture is the great deference and respect given to one's elders.

⁶ Data for this paper has been drawn from elicitation sessions with P'urhepecha native speakers through the medium of Spanish, a shared language.

⁷ In what follows, I make use of a practical orthography for the P'urhepecha examples. Note that $j = [x]$, $x = [j]$, $rh = [r]$, and $i = [i]$; the symbol ' after a consonant marks aspiration.

⁸ For instance, *exesiña* can be translated as both 'I/you sg. see' and 'we/you pl. see'.

Also, when invoking or addressing natural elements such as the sun, the moon, the earth, wind, rain, and some other manifestations of nature (for instance, plants like corn—a basic staple), the formal form of address tends to be used, as reflected in the application of common titles, such as *tata* ‘sir, Mr.’ and *nana* ‘madam, Mrs.’, to these items. Some examples are:

<i>Tata tsiri</i>	‘Mr. Corn’	<i>Tata janikua</i>	‘Mr. Rain’
<i>Tata jurhiata</i>	‘Mr. Sun’	<i>Tata echeri</i>	‘Mr. Earth’
<i>Nana kutsi</i>	‘Mrs. Moon’		

As an illustration of this usage, we have the following invocation said at the end of the harvest season:

(1) *Jau=e* *ia* *tata xanini*, *menderu=jtsi* *materu* *uéxurhini jimbo ixu jauaka*,⁹
 go-IMP=you(FOR) already Mr. com again=you(FOR) other year in here be-FUT¹⁰

which may be roughly translated as: “Go on your way Mr. Corn, next year you’ll come back again.”

Within the family, although social mores may be changing, the use of forms of address between parents and children is generally speaking not symmetrical: Whereas parents talk to their children using *t’u*, children address parents with *cha*; among siblings *t’u* is employed. When addressing older relatives one is to employ *cha*, and older relatives address younger ones with *t’u*.

Another relevant observation regarding forms of address is the fact that during courtship, according to the native speakers who were consulted, the two persons involved always use formal *cha* in their speech and not informal *t’u*. After they get married, this state of affairs usually changes in favor of *t’u*.

Titles may also be employed to express politeness and show respect in direct address: *Tata* ‘sir, Mr.’ and *nana* ‘madam, Mrs.’ may be followed by first name, last name, or both, as well as by a person’s profession or occupation: *Tata Lazaru* (first name), *tata Vasco de Quiroga* (first name and last name), *tata Equihua* (last name), *nana Ayala* (last name); *tata ingenieru* (Mr. Engineer), *nana maestra* (Madam Teacher), *tata gobernadori* (Mr. Governor), *tata presidenti* (Mr. President), *tata juesi* (Mr. Judge), *tata padre* (Mr. Padre (priest)), and so on. However, these titles are not just given to any adult male or female since they presuppose the attainment of a certain social standing and involvement in the community.

In addition to pronouns, one of the most notable aspects of the grammatical encoding of person reference in P’urhepecha is the existence of pronominal enclitics corresponding to each of the six grammatical persons (Foster 1969; Chamoreau 2003). These subject enclitics are usually attached to the main verb, although they are often

⁹ The morpho-syntactic analysis of the P’urhepecha examples is somewhat simplified; this should not affect the analysis of the relevant issues.

¹⁰ Abbreviations used in the examples: IMP – Imperative; FUT – Future; COND – Conditional; INFR – Informal; FOR – Formal; INT – Interrogative; INF – Infinitive; OBJ – Objective (case); LOC – Locative; pl. – Plural; sg. – Singular.

attached to some other content word (noun, adverb) in the same utterance, and may be used in addition to the subject pronouns or without them. There is certain degree of flexibility with regard to the use of pronominal enclitics vis-à-vis subject pronouns in P'urhepecha, as the presence of a pronominal enclitic neither precludes nor requires the presence of the corresponding subject pronoun. The P'urhepecha system of pronominal enclitics for subject is as follows:¹¹

- 1st person singular: =*ni*
 2nd person singular: =*ri*
 3rd person singular: Ø (zero marking)
 1st person plural: =*ksi*
 2nd person plural: =*jtsi* (*jtsi* in some dialects)
 3rd person plural: =*ksi*

Focusing for the moment only on second person reference, the 2nd person singular enclitic *ri*, with or without the presence of the subject pronoun *t'u*, indicates informality and familiarity or intimacy, whereas the 2nd person plural enclitic *jtsi*, with or without the subject pronoun *cha*, may signal formality, respect, and politeness. We note that *jtsi*, as well as *cha*, are ambiguous since they refer to both 2nd person singular formal and 2nd person plural, in the latter case without distinction of formality. According to Brown and Levinson (1978: 184), the use of plural pronouns for singular addressees occurs widely across languages.

Some examples that illustrate the use of the enclitics are the following:

- (2) *Ua=jtsi* (sani) mikani mikuani?
 be.able-FUT-INT=you(FOR) (please) close-INF door-OBJ
 'Can you close the door, (please)?'
- (3) *Upirini=jtsi* (sani) uandani p'urhepecha jimbo?
 be.able-COND-INT=you(FOR) (please) speak-INF P'urhepecha in
 'Could you speak (in) P'urhepecha (please)?'
- (4) *Niua=ri* pauani k'uinchikuarhu?
 go-FUT-INT=you(INFR) tomorrow party-LOC
 'Will you go to the party tomorrow?'
- (5) *Exeski=ri* uitsindikua futiboli telerhu?
 watch-PRET-INT=you(INFR) yesterday soccer TV-LOC
 'Did you watch soccer on TV yesterday?'

In these examples, *ri* and *jtsi* appear right after the finite verb in each sentence and serve as an overt marker of the level of formality intended by the speaker posing the question. Example (5) can be compared to its formal version below, which is identical to it in all respects, except for the appropriate pronominal enclitic:

¹¹ Subject enclitics can also combine with object enclitics to yield complex subject-object pronominals. For further details on these enclitics, see Foster (1969) and Chamoreau (2003).

- (6) *Exeski=jtsi* *uitsindikua futiboli telerhu?*
 watch-PRET-INT=you(FOR) yesterday soccer TV-LOC
 ‘Did you watch soccer on TV yesterday?’

The pronominal enclitics have been incorporated in conventional greetings such as ‘Good morning’ and ‘Good afternoon’, since these greetings actually originate from conventionalized verbal constructions. Thus, a greeting like ‘Good morning’ has two possible realizations, according to whether the addressee is a person to be addressed with *cha* or *t’u*:

- (7) *Na=jtsi* *erandiski?*
 how=you(FOR) wake.up-INT
 ‘Good morning’ (Formal)

- (8) *Na=ri* *erandiski?*
 how=you(INFR) wake.up-INT
 ‘Good morning’ (Informal)

3.2. The P’urhepecha imperative

The imperative constitutes another feature of the grammar of P’urhepecha that may convey different degrees of politeness. Just like the distinction in the pronominal system between second person singular formal and second person singular informal can make an utterance more or less polite, a verb in the imperative can be modified to adapt to the social requirements of addressing different types of addressees. An imperative corresponding to the second person plural pronoun, which (as seen above) performs double duty as the second person singular formal pronoun, will be interpreted as more polite than an imperative that corresponds to the second person singular informal pronoun. One way to form polite imperatives is to drop the infinitive verbal ending *-ni* and then add the clitic *je* (or alternatively *e*) to the verbal base thus obtained. Furthermore, *je* can also be attached to another word if a verb is not present.

An imperative without the addition of any hedging word may be rather strong and can be even rude if used unmitigated. An expression such as the modifier ‘please’ can go a long way in softening it, making it less forceful and more polite. In spite of this, however, unmitigated imperatives seem to appear rather frequently in P’urhepecha speech, which might suggest that this form is perhaps not as grammaticalized to express politeness in the language. Interestingly, the regular P’urhepecha word for ‘please’, *sani*,¹² also means ‘a little/somewhat’, as is the case in languages like Tamil and Malagasy (Brown and Levinson 1987: 177). In Spanish, words meaning ‘little’ and a number of diminutive suffixes are used in contexts of politeness (Mendoza 2005). It is certainly the case that diminutives act as semantic and/or pragmatic hedges in many languages, weakening the illocutionary force of speech acts, such as requests. Whether this might be true in P’urhepecha too is a matter that deserves further attention.

¹²Another word meaning ‘please’ in P’urhepecha is *jimbotakua*.

Some examples of polite imperatives in P'urhepecha are the following; *je* appears immediately after the verbal base:

<i>Uaxakaje</i>	'sit down'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>uaxakani</i>)
<i>Piréje</i>	'sing'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>piréni</i>)
<i>Karáje</i>	'write'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>karáni</i>)
<i>Uandaje</i>	'speak'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>uandani</i>)
<i>Paje</i>	'take'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>pani</i>)
<i>Exeje</i>	'look'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>exeni</i>)
<i>Arhintaje</i>	'read'	(you pl. or you sg. polite)	(< <i>arhintani</i>)

The polite reply to all these imperatives includes *je* as well, if appropriate, even if the verb is omitted in such reply. For example, to the command:

- (9) *Uaxaka=je* *sani*
 sit.down-IMP=you(FOR) please
 'Sit down, please'

one should reply:

- (10) *Ia=je,* *diosimeiamu*¹³
 already=you(FOR) thank.you
 'Yes, thank you'

And even in the case that the addressee refuses to comply, her answer will also usually include *je*:

- (11) *Nombe=je*
 not=you(FOR)
 'No (thanks)'

Further examples follow:

- (12) *Erokuarhi=je* *sani, jimbotakua cha*
 wait-IMP=you(FOR) a.little please you(FOR)
 'Wait a minute, please'

- (13) *Ia=je,* *sesi jarhásti*
 yes=you(FOR) fine is
 'Yes, it's fine'

- (14) *Asi itsuta=je* *ixu, jimbotakua cha*
 not smoke-IMP=you(FOR) here please you(FOR)
 'Do not smoke here, please'

¹³ This is the ordinary expression for 'thank you' in P'urhepecha, likely a calque from the Spanish expression (*Que*) *Dios te/se lo pague* meaning 'May God pay you'.

- (15) *A! Tekanta=je*
 oh excuse-IMP=you(FOR)
 ‘Oh, I’m sorry’

As Evans (2010: 79) observes when discussing the grammatical categories languages develop in the course of their history: “the speaking cultures that gradually shaped [languages] over millennia must have made these [grammatical] distinctions often enough in past talk by their speakers for them to become [installed in their core grammatical apparatus.” The examples so far clearly demonstrate that over time P’urhepecha speakers have found it crucial to encode politeness distinctions as part of the grammatical structure of their language.

3.3. The P’urhepecha future

With regard to the expression of politeness in the P’urhepecha verbal system, one of the grammatical resources exploited in the language to express indirect requests and offers in particular is the use of interrogative structures in the future tense, with or without the mitigating word ‘please’. Morphologically, the future is formed by eliminating the infinitive ending *-ni* from the verb and adding either *-aka* (for 1st and 2nd persons, singular and plural) or *-ati* (for 3rd persons, singular and plural)¹⁴ in the assertive mood¹⁵ and only *-a* to form questions. The future contains a certain aspectual component of uncertainty and thus allows the speaker to keep her pragmatic distance and avoid making a direct and rude assumption about what the addressee will or will not do. The use of the modal future in P’urhepecha in these types of indirect speech acts is widespread.¹⁶ It is also rather common to see the conditional in these structures as we will see below (section 3.4). With respect to the conditional, P’urhepecha does not seem to behave much differently than a language like Spanish, which also makes use of it for polite requests and offers (cf. Chodorowska-Pilch 2004; Haverkate 1990).

Indirectness in speech acts is undoubtedly a trait associated with politeness and relates directly to one of Lakoff’s (1973) proposed maxims of polite behavior: Do not impose. It also accords with Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) negative politeness strategies regarding non-imposition, given that “the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative-face wants” (i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition) (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61, 70). Furthermore, we also know from the work of authors like Fleischmann (1989) that temporal distance is often a metaphor for epistemic and social distance. This is corroborated by the P’urhepecha data, as observed in the following examples:

- (16) *No=ri uekaa (sani) mikani mikuani?*
 not=you(INFR) want-FUT-INT (please) close-INF door-OBJ
 ‘Won’t you close the door, (please)?’ (Literally, ‘Won’t you want to close the door, (please)?’)

¹⁴ These verbal endings actually represent the combination of the future marker (*-a*) plus the assertive morphemes (*-ka*, *-ti*).

¹⁵ Thus, a verb such as *exeni* ‘see’ is conjugated in the future as follows: *ji/t’u exeaka* ‘I/you sg. will see’, *ima exeati* ‘he/she will see’, *jucha/cha exeaka* ‘we/you pl. will see’, *ts’ima exeati* ‘they will see’.

¹⁶ Other Mesoamerican languages with this polite use of the future are the Nahuatl languages (Suárez 1983: 73-74).

- (17) *No=jtsī uekaa mikani mikuani?*
 not=you(FOR) want-FUT-INT close-INF door-OBJ
 ‘Won’t you close the door?’ (Literally, ‘Won’t you want to close the door?’)
- (18) *Ua=rini sani intsimbeni itukua?*
 be.able-FUT-INT=you.to.me(INFR) please give-INF salt
 ‘Can you lend me some salt?’ (Literally, ‘Will you be able to give me some salt?’)
- (19) *No=jtsī sani aua kafe?*
 not=you(FOR) some drink-FUT-INT coffee
 ‘Do you like some coffee?’ (Literally, ‘Won’t you drink some coffee?’)

One important observation about the data is that, even when the English (or Spanish) translation corresponds to an utterance in the present tense, in all such cases P’urhepecha will only allow the future. This is clearly seen in examples (18-19). In (19), for instance, the offer ‘Do you like some coffee?’ (Spanish: *¿Quieres un café?*) is rendered in the future tense in P’urhepecha. Using the present tense will effectively void the implication of politeness.

3.4. The P’urhepecha conditional

The conditional in P’urhepecha is another variation on the theme “grammatical distance reflects social distance.” As we have seen in the case of the future, by deviating from the more simple and direct, the speaker communicates that considerations of politeness are being taken into account in her interactions with others. Utterances that include the conditional feel less assertive, thus minimizing impositions (real or perceived). This distancing effect from the here and now achieved by the conditional and other non-present tenses again relates to negative politeness strategies whereby speakers avoid excessively burdening the addressee (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987).

The conditional is morphologically formed by eliminating the infinitive *-ni* and adding the endings *-piringa* (1st and 2nd persons) and *-pirindi* (3rd persons) in the assertive;¹⁷ in the interrogative, the conditional suffix is *-pirini*. Several examples illustrating the use of the conditional in indirect speech acts in P’urhepecha follow:¹⁸

- (20) *Upirini=ri karáchini ma sirandani?*
 be.able-COND-INT=you(INFR) write-me-INF a document-OBJ
 ‘Could you write a document on my behalf?’
- (21) *Uekapirini=ri sani mikani mikuani?*
 want-COND-INT=you(INFR) please close-INF door-OBJ
 ‘Would you close the door, please?’ (Literally, ‘Would you want to close the door, please?’)

¹⁷ These endings are a combination of the conditional (*-pirin*) and the assertive morphemes (*-ka*, *-ti*), with obligatory voicing of the post-nasal occlusive.

¹⁸ The conditional in P’urhepecha also appears in counterfactual constructions of the type *Eki jatsipiringani tumina, nipiringani Morelia* ‘If I had money, I would go to Morelia’.

- (22) *No=jtsĩ itsutapiringa ixu*
 not=you(FOR) smoke-COND here
 ‘You shouldn’t smoke here’
- (23) *No=jtsĩ sani apirini kafe?*
 not=you(FOR) some drink-COND-INT coffee
 ‘Would you like some coffee?’ (Literally, ‘Would you not drink some coffee?’)

In all these sentences, the conditional performs its politeness function in a fairly straightforward manner through the grammatical distancing effect achieved by the temporal remoteness of the conditional as well as, in many instances, the superimposition of interrogative structures (another indirectness strategy). Haverkate (1990: 113) remarks that “this distance may be associated with the interpersonal distance speakers create in order to express politeness or mitigation” and that “the potentially polite interpretation of the conditional can be explained in terms of metaphorical distance or space.” Furthermore, the length of the sentence appears to also have politeness implications: The longer the sentence, the more polite it seems to be. Longer sentences take more time and effort to be uttered and this may serve a utilitarian purpose. One may speculate that, since the speaker goes through more trouble in producing them, the addressee may feel more inclined to pay attention to (and hopefully comply with) the request.

A summary of the politeness strategies discussed so far involving verb constructions is shown below, arranged on a scale from less polite to more polite. Examples (24-27) correspond to 2nd person singular informal (*t’u*) and (28-31) to 2nd person singular formal (*cha*):

- (24) *Intsĩta=rini itukua*
 pass-IMP=you.to.me(INFR) salt
 ‘Pass me the salt’ (Informal)
- (25) *Ua=rini intsĩtani itukua?*
 be.able-FUT-INT=you.to.me(INFR) pass-INF salt
 ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ (Informal)
- (26) *No=rini sani intsĩtaa itukua?*
 not=you.to.me(INFR) please pass-FUT-INT salt
 ‘Won’t you pass me the salt, please?’ (Informal)
- (27) *Upirini=rini intsĩtani itukua?*
 be.able-COND-INT=you.to.me(INFR) pass-INF salt
 ‘Could you pass me the salt?’ (Informal)
- (28) *Intsĩta=jtsĩni itukua*
 pass-IMP=you.to.me(FOR) salt
 ‘Pass me the salt’ (Formal)
- (29) *Ua=jtsĩni intsĩtani itukua?*
 be.able-FUT-INT=you.to.me(FOR) pass-INF salt
 ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ (Formal)

(30) *No=jtsĩni sani intsĩtaa itukua?*
 not=you.to.me(FOR) please pass-FUT-INT salt
 ‘Won’t you pass me the salt, please?’ (Formal)

(31) *Upirini=jtsĩni intsĩtani itukua?*
 be.able-COND-INT=you.to.me(FOR) pass-INF salt
 ‘Could you pass me the salt?’ (Formal)

In broad terms, the imperative is less polite than the future, and the future less polite than the conditional; adding ‘no’ to the utterance also appears to place it higher on the politeness scale, most likely by preemptively anticipating a negative response on the part of the addressee; in Brown and Levinson’s (1978: 178-181) terms, by being pessimistic.

4. Politeness and universals

One specific issue that has been debated in the politeness literature is whether Brown and Levinson’s theory (1978, 1987) on the universality of politeness strategies holds when assessed with respect to widely differing languages. The claim is that such universals as proposed by these authors (1978, 1987)—and also Lakoff (1973, 1980)—are questionable since, among other objections, the notion of face is likely to be culturally determined and the role played by social context needs to be taken much more into account (Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1989; Fraser 2005). At the same time, however, the study of politeness phenomena does not have to be an “all or nothing” proposition; context is certainly a most important consideration, and, also in the case of P’urhepecha, socio-pragmatic context and cultural norms at work in the community are without doubt bound to play a significant role, and further investigation will most likely provide a more complex picture of the strategies surveyed here. Yet, it also seems highly plausible that at least some politeness strategies will turn out to be, if not universal, fairly close to having such status while some others will be more language specific. Thus, besides looking into P’urhepecha on its own, it can also prove extremely helpful to compare it to such a typologically divergent language as Spanish to ascertain whether the two differ widely in their politeness strategies or, on the contrary, there are enough similarities pointing in the direction of potential politeness universals.

4.1. Politeness in P’urhepecha vs. Politeness in Spanish

A brief comparison of politeness strategies in Spanish¹⁹ and P’urhepecha is presented next in order to examine to what extent similar types of strategies are used by speakers of these languages.²⁰

¹⁹ The discussion here refers to Mexican Spanish.

²⁰ We should note that these two languages have been in close contact since the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century, and Spanish constitutes the dominant language in this highly asymmetrical relationship.

Let us start with areas of agreement. First, as discussed in 3.1, P'urhepecha makes use of two second person singular pronouns, one informal and one formal. As stated before, *cha*, the formal pronoun, actually performs a double function, given that it also marks second person plural without a formality distinction. In addition, P'urhepecha possesses pronominal enclitics that grammatically express the formality/familiarity contrast. It is of course widely known that Spanish also makes a distinction between the singular informal *tú* and the singular formal *usted*, with their respective plurals: *vosotros*²¹ and *ustedes*. The contexts of usage for both sets of pronouns appear to largely coincide in the two languages: The formal pronoun is typically employed to address persons of a higher social status, strangers and unfamiliar persons (but not children), and old(er) people. One main difference lies in the fact that Spanish in general, unlike P'urhepecha, does not employ formal address terms but informal ones when addressing God, the Virgin, and the saints, as well as in invocations of nature and the elements.

Secondly, some of the grammatical means through which P'urhepecha expresses politeness are also found in equivalent structures in Spanish; for instance, the use of the polite imperative, often softened by the word 'please', or the use of the conditional, with or without 'please', as shown in the following examples (the verbal forms in question are underlined):

IMPERATIVE

Spanish:

- (32) *Páseme* *la sal, por favor*
 pass-me-IMP(FOR) the salt please
 'Pass me the salt, please' (Formal)

P'urhepecha:

- (33) *Intsíta=jtsini* *sani itukua*
 pass-IMP=you.to.me(FOR) please salt
 'Pass me the salt, please' (Formal)

CONDITIONAL

Spanish:

- (34) *¿Podría* *regalarme una tacita de azúcar?*
 be.able-COND-you(FOR) give-INF-me a little.cup of sugar
 'Could I borrow a cup of sugar?' (Formal)

P'urhepecha:

- (35) *No=jtsini* *upirini* *intsimbeni ma tasa asukari?*
 not=you.to.me(FOR) be able-COND-INT give-INF a cup sugar
 'Could I borrow a cup of sugar?' (Formal)

²¹ *Vosotros* is present only in Peninsular Spanish. In Mexican Spanish, as well as in Latin American varieties, *ustedes* is the second person plural pronoun for both formal and informal usages.

Spanish:

- (36) *¿Podrías leerme esta carta?*
 be.able-COND-you(INFR) read-INF-me this letter
 ‘Could you read this letter for me?’(Informal)

P’urhepecha:

- (37) *Upirini=ri arhintachini i karákatani?*
 be.able-COND-INT=you(INFR) read-me-INF this letter-OBJ
 ‘Could you read this letter for me?’(Informal)

In these examples we observe similar resources in both languages regarding the encoding in their linguistic structure of the all important social considerations of politeness.

4.2. The future: Spanish vs. P’urhepecha

The future tense constitutes one area where these two languages differ with respect to politeness strategies. The use of the future in Spanish does not carry the politeness connotations it does in P’urhepecha. In Spanish a question formulated in the future, for example: *¿Me pasarás la sal?* inquires about future behavior on the part of the addressee, but it does not work as a polite request. P’urhepecha, on the other hand, in this respect behaves more like a language such as English; thus, a question containing a verb in the future such as: *Intsītaajtsini itukua?* ‘Will you pass me the salt?’ can function perfectly as a request. In English the polite intention is made abundantly clear with the addition of ‘please’. In P’urhepecha this is the case too; that is, adding *sani* ‘please’ greatly mitigates the force of the request.

By contrast, one very common way to express requests in Spanish is the use of the verbs *poder* ‘be able to’ or *querer* ‘want’ (cf. Haverkate 1990) in interrogative structures in the present tense (or the conditional), with or without *por favor* ‘please’. For instance, the Spanish utterance *¿Puedes pasarme la sal?* ‘Can you pass me the salt?’ (literally, ‘Are you able to pass me the salt?’) is a request in the form of a question. In P’urhepecha such a question would not convey a request and could only be interpreted as a literal inquiry as to whether the addressee is physically able to pass the salt (**Usinirini intsītani itukua?*). In such cases, as we have seen, P’urhepecha requires the future tense (*Uarini intsītani itukua?* ‘Can you pass me the salt?’), not the present.

Similarly, with the verb ‘want’ in interrogative structures in the present tense, in Spanish a request is usually put forth. For example, the Spanish utterance: *¿Quieres cerrar la puerta?* ‘Will you close the door?’ (literally, ‘Do you want to close the door?’) represents a request in the appropriate context. The P’urhepecha equivalent in the present tense (**Uekasīniri mikani mikuani?*) does not work as a request but constitutes a direct inquiry as to the preferences or desires of the addressee, for instance in a sentence such as: ‘Do you want to close the door or do you want to leave it open?’, where a clear choice is presented. For these types of requests with ‘want’ in P’urhepecha, once more, the modal future is required, as in: *Uekaari mikani mikuani?* ‘Will you close the door?’.

Thus, the use of the future in P'urhepecha effectively underscores the fact that the outcome of any request is dependent upon what the addressee will actually do or not do, on "what the future may bring," so to speak. The successful outcome of the speaker's request is left in the addressee's hands (linguistically, at least). Using the future in the question signals a certain degree of uncertainty on the part of the speaker, who avoids being considered presumptuous and thus saves face, leaving it up to the addressee to respond (or not) in a positive manner.

4.3. Negation: Spanish vs. P'urhepecha

Another area of potential disagreement between the two languages lies in the use of negation in questions intended as requests. In P'urhepecha, such negative structures appear to be widely used as a means of mitigating the force of the request and, therefore, as a politeness device. Spanish, once again, does not seem to share this strong tendency. It is not completely ruled out, but it is definitely less common. We again notice that the future, rather than the present, is employed in P'urhepecha in these cases as well:

(38) *No uekaa=jtsĩ* (sani) mikani mikuani?
not want-FUT-INT=you(FOR) please close-INF door
'Won't you close the door (please)?' (Literally, 'Won't you want to close the door?')

(39) *No ua=ri* mikani mikuani?
not be.able-FUT-INT=you(INFR) close-INF door
'Can you close the door?' (Literally, 'Won't you be able to close the door?')

(40) *No=jtsĩni* sani intsĩtaa sutupu?
not=you.to.me(FOR) please pass-FUT-INT bag
'Won't you pass me the bag, please?'

The use of negative questions is a case of a positive politeness strategy employed, according to Brown and Levinson (1987: 122), "to indicate that S knows H's wants, tastes, habits, etc., and thus partially to redress the imposition of FTA's." By presupposing knowledge of the addressee's wants and attitudes, the speaker claims "common ground" with the addressee, seeking a positive outcome in the interaction. However, this can also be regarded as a way to increase the pragmatic distance between request and final outcome and, therefore, minimize the sense of imposition on the interlocutor, making it in actuality a negative politeness strategy.

In Spanish, a negation may be attached to requests in the present tense as in: *¿No cierras la puerta, por favor?* 'Won't you close the door, please?'. However, it cannot be used with the future tense for requests: **¿No cerrarás la puerta, por favor?* 'Won't you close the door, please?'. Even in the conditional, the use of negation for requests in Spanish is rather limited, if not forbidden: *¿No cerrarías la puerta, por favor?* 'Wouldn't you close the door, please?'.

Negative questions in P'urhepecha are not only used for requests like the above but also for offers:

(41) *No=jtsĩ sani apirini kafe?*
 not=you(FOR) a.little drink-COND-INT coffee
 ‘Would you like some coffee?’ (Literally, ‘Wouldn’t you drink some coffee?’)

(42) *No=ri sani aua kafe?*
 not=you(INFR) a.little drink-FUT-INT coffee
 ‘Do you like some coffee?’ (Literally, ‘Won’t you drink some coffee?’)

The answers to these questions will normally also include the pronominal enclitics that express the degree of formality required. More specifically, the use of a formal enclitic is to be reciprocated in the same manner, unless we are dealing with asymmetrical politeness as it is the case between elders talking to children.

Upon comparing Spanish and P’urhepecha, we can tentatively conclude that the correspondence of tense/mood for polite utterances in the two languages is as follows:

Spanish imperative	→	P’urhepecha imperative
Spanish present	→	P’urhepecha future
Spanish conditional	→	P’urhepecha conditional

We observe that, as discussed in section 4.2, the main area where the two languages differ with respect to their use of verbal inflections for politeness purposes is the presence of the Spanish present where P’urhepecha employs the future. Also, this distribution would make P’urhepecha more similar to English than to Spanish in its use of particular verbal tenses in politeness.

5. Conclusion

The P’urhepecha politeness strategies surveyed in this paper include terms of address, subject pronouns and enclitics, as well as imperative, future, and conditional constructions. The examples presented have been found to pertain mostly to negative politeness strategies. This is not to say, however, that positive politeness strategies may not also play an important role in P’urhepecha (or Spanish). However, the fact remains that most of the public social interaction in both languages appears to take place in the realm of the more formal, and social distance is very much adhered to. Social lines are not easily crossed given that everyone knows their place in the social arena. In this regard, Kartunnen (1992: 250-253) points out that among the people of Mesoamerica there is a strong sense of propriety and one of its most cherished norms is *respeto* (respect); in this environment, “everyone has ample opportunity to know what is expected of him or her” (Kartunnen 1992: 253). In fact, it is considered extremely rude to address someone using the wrong personal pronoun, both in P’urhepecha and in Spanish. *T’u* and *cha*, on the one hand, and *tú* and *usted*, on the other, are not easily interchangeable without negative social consequences.²²

²² This also pertains to the kind of politeness rooted in social norms (cf. the concept of *wakimae* (discernment), as proposed by Ide (1989)), which “assumes the setting of social standards and implies that social sanctions will be applied if these standards are not met” (Watts, Ide, and Ehlich 1992: 5).

To conclude, P'urhepecha is an endangered language with no known relatives today, and its careful study should provide us with a better understanding of the politeness phenomena at work cross-linguistically, as well as those that are specific to this individual language. Further investigation should be conducted about P'urhepecha with respect to the role of context and social norms in politeness as well as the inclusion of other indirect speech acts besides requests. Nonetheless, from this basic approximation to the study of politeness strategies in P'urhepecha, and their comparison to analogous strategies in Spanish, we may conclude that, while it is true that there may exist linguistic idiosyncrasies found in this language isolate in particular, overall the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) in its fundamental aspects finds further confirmation in the P'urhepecha (and Spanish) data.

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