

## SEX-RELATED AND POWER-RELATED DIFFERENCES IN CONVEYING POLITE MEANINGS ON THE EXAMPLE OF OFFERS

Offers, along with thanks, are considered to be a strategy of positive politeness. This view is common to both the traditional pragmatic views upon politeness, particularly Leech's (1983, cf. also Fraser 1990) theory according to which offers belong to the convivial acts (together with invitations, thanks, greetings and congratulations), and to Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness. According to the latter, offers are manifestations of a higher-order strategy which convey that both the speaker and the listener are co-operators in that the speaker indicates that whatever the hearer wants, the speaker wants it for the hearer, too, even if the intentions of the speaker are not entirely true (Brown and Levinson 1987/1994: 125).

Marcjanik (1997) in her analysis of expressions of politeness distinguishes between offers (or declarations) of help, offers of food and drink and invitations, and treats them all as separate categories. This procedure will not be adhered to in the present analysis due to the structural and pragmatic similarities of these expressions. The examples analysed below will demonstrate that, contrary to Marcjanik's (1997: 101) claim that invitations perform only a phatic function in terms of the prospective socialising, invitations may in certain circumstances be utilised as offers of help (cf. also Davidson 1984). Those are accounted for by Marcjanik (1997: 113) as declarations of dependence in the sense that the speaker deduces that the listener will not manage with a certain activity on his/her own in a satisfactory manner and for this reason the speaker feels obliged to offer help. Moreover, the offer to help might be induced by social pressure that the speaker may be experiencing in a given situation.

### 1. The context

In the discussion of offers, their analysis will be based on the data which was collected by means of a questionnaire distributed among 71 British English speakers, the number being divided almost equally between men and women. The responses were induced by the description of two situations, the latter being further divided into two sub-cases in which the respondents were asked to react verbally. Thus, the first situation was described as follows:

- 1) An elderly woman has trouble getting on the bus. How would you offer help?

The other situation was sketched in this way:

2) It is raining: a) your superior, b) a colleague do not have an umbrella. How would you offer to give them a lift?

Each of the situations will be discussed separately, and only then will the conclusions (i.e. the typical forms) drawn on the basis of each be compared. Within each of the dyads the discussion will follow the gender-related order of presentation, viz. the male respondents first and then the female respondents, respectively.

## 2. Situation 1

### 2.1. Male respondents

As regards dyad I (the stranger – stranger dyad), the way the British male respondents chose to react in the given context were obviously varied. When the form of the offers typically employed by the British men was examined, a few possibilities particularly stood out. The formulas for which the male British respondents showed their greatest preference can be illustrated by the following utterances:

*Can / May I give you a hand?*

*Can / May I help you?*

obviously with a slight alteration of the form, e.g. the omission of the addressative *you*, or alternately, and additional term of address to follow, e.g. *my dear*. These two forms of making an offer were attested by 38% and 30% of the respondents, respectively. As can be observed, the two formulas, which make use of the interrogative form, follow the characteristic pattern established for offers, i.e. 'can I offer you something?'. Making an offer typically assumes that the addressee is given an option to either accept the suggestion or reject it (cf. Davidson 1984), the very fact of giving options to the addressee being a manifestation of positive politeness (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987/1994), and thus it is more in agreement with the rules of politeness to ask if the interlocutor wishes to take advantage of the offer, rather than to impose the offer on another person in a more categorical way. Examples of the latter type were also, though rather infrequently, recorded, e.g. *Here, let me help you* or *Allow me...*, both uttered by the speakers of above 55.

### 2.2. Female respondents

When the group of responses offered by the British women was considered, the analysis resulted in some interesting differences. The formulas that they typically employed were distributed differently than in the case of the male respondents. It appears that the formula which was by far most preferable was:

*Can / May I help you?* (66%)

with a possible substitution of *to assist* for *to help* in some cases. The formula favoured by men, i.e. *Can / May I give you a hand?* was not recorded, the closest one

to that being *Do you want a hand?* which was suggested only once. Even though the numbers were not very significant, a few phrases of the 'do you + V + Obj' pattern are noteworthy for the reason that the men did not choose to offer help in this way (cf. *Do you want some help?*, *Do you want a hand?*, *Do you need help?*). On the other hand, unlike the men, the female respondents never made use of the imperative forms.

### 3. Situation 2

The other of the two situations whose purpose was to evoke a reaction in the form of an offer was more complex in that it assumed two possible recipients of the utterance. An obvious reason for distinguishing between an addressee of a higher status and probably older than the speaker and between someone of an equal social position and possibly age was to observe whether these sociolinguistic variables, i.e. the differences in the relative power between the interlocutors, would in any marked way alter the verbal behaviour of the speakers.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the assumption was to demonstrate that a higher rank and a more advanced age, i.e. a greater power of the addressee, would induce a more deferential behaviour on the part of the speaker, the attitude which would be reflected in the level of vocabulary, forms of address and the overall grammatical structure of the utterance. According to the classification of power suggested by Wareing (Thomas and Wareing 1999: 11), this type of power within a dyad can be categorised as 'personal power', as opposed to 'political power' and 'social group power', as it results from the individual roles certain people hold in relation to others, and the typical roles include those of teachers, employers or parents. One of the dyads described by the questionnaire was that of the respondent holding a subordinate role in relation to their superior. Here a fairly marked asymmetrical relationship between the interlocutors can be assumed, particularly that, as Hudson (1996) claims, the employee – (distant) superior dyad is a prototypical situation accounting for power relationship. This may additionally be emphasised by the fact that it is men who are traditionally ascribed greater power than women, and, as some of the questionnaire data imply, the prototypical superior still tends to be portrayed as a man.

The other of the two selected dyads, viz. the intimate – intimate dyad, is to be viewed as an example of a symmetrical relationship between the speakers, i.e. one which calls for solidarity in interaction.

#### 3.1. Male respondents

##### 3.1.1. The superior

And thus, in the case of the men offering a lift to their superior a fair number of choices was presented. Out of these, two in particular seemed to recur more frequently than others, and these were:

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of power was derived from Brown and Gilman's theory of *power and solidarity* (1960).

*May / Can I give (offer) you a lift?* (48%)

*Would you like a lift?* (26%)

Thus, as can be observed, both employed an interrogative structure. Like in situation 1, the interrogative form leaves the choice with the addressee, which is a manifestation of deference certainly greater than the imperative form.

Apart from the two forms mentioned above, other variations of interrogative phrases were to be found as well, though less frequently than the two former ones, e.g. *Do you need a lift?*, *Fancy a lift?* The remaining alternatives constituted a mixed group of declaratives and conditional clauses which seemed to be overly polite in their character due to the elaborate form and the conditional mood applied (cf. *I'd be only too pleased to give you a lift, I'm very happy to give you a lift to wherever you need to go*). Clearly however, even though the marked power difference in the dyad may call for a fairly formal language, the informality of the context makes the speaker choose a less ceremonial mode of expression. The two formal responses were suggested by middle-aged and senior respondents, which to a certain extent might explain the choice (the two most typical expressions mentioned above, on the other hand, were equally frequently utilised by both the older and the younger generation). The remaining examples of offers took the imperative form.

Out of all the recorded phrases, only 9% included some formal terms of address *Sir / Madam*, whose use in English is optional. Thus, their very use indicates a greater respect on the part of the speaker (again, the respondents in this case were 45 and older, which might point to a decreasing use of such titles amongst the younger generation).

### 3.1.2. The colleague

As could be assumed, a rather conspicuous difference was recorded between the expressions addressed to the superior and to the colleague. Indeed, 28% of the respondents used the same formulas to both recipients, which were the fairly universal expressions like: *Would you like a lift, Let me drive you*, etc. However, amongst the other ones, the types most frequently recorded were:

*Jump / Hop in / Come with me*,

i.e. the form of the imperative (20%).

Very closely represented were also the declaratives, like:

*I'll give you a lift / drive you* (16%)

and interrogatives without the auxiliary *do*, and thus typical of the very informal language:

*Want/Fancy a lift?* (16%)

Altogether, the expressions addressed to a colleague were as varied in terms of the form used as those employed in the presence of the superior, however, a remarkable shift of focus was observed from the deferential type of offers expressed by means of (full) interrogatives directed to the superior to either imperatives, declaratives or clipped interrogatives used with the colleague. Almost all of these forms exemplify the bold-on-record strategy, and their aim is to emphasise the common ground between the speaker and the addressee (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987/1994). Being more formal

could introduce an unnecessary distance between the otherwise fairly close collaborators.

Compared to the set of phrases applied in situation 2a, the formulas attested in situation 2b differed in a number of features. What is particularly noteworthy is the shortness of the form in the latter case, mainly due to much greater informality of the language. Quite a few expressions were introduced by an intensifying opening phrase encouraging the recipient to take advantage of the offer, also uttered in the form of the imperative, viz. *Come on* or *Come along*, a feature which was not found in situation 2a. As in the previous situation, also here a few expressions utilised specific forms of address. Instead of 'sir/madam', however, the title used was *mate*, the very meaning of which suggests a close relationship between the interlocutors.

### 3.2. Female respondents

As will be demonstrated, the performance of the female respondents showed similar tendencies to that of the men in the interaction with their superiors, the expressions favoured in relation to their colleagues, however, manifested some different strategies.

#### 3.2.1. The superior

When addressing their superior, the female speakers resorted to a fairly large variety of formulas, the most typical of which turned out to be in correspondence with those preferred by the men in the equivalent situation. Thus, they were:

*Would you like a lift?* (38%)

*Can I give / offer you a lift?* (33%)

It is noteworthy that, unlike in the group of the male respondents, nearly all the expressions noted here had an interrogative form.

A distinction between the formulas used by the men and the women was also a considerably higher frequency of the opening and follow-up phrases on the part of the women which, as a rule, had a character of a justification for making the offer (cf. *it's a dreadful weather / as the weather is so awful, because it's not out of my way, it's no trouble*, etc.). It seems that in a fairly embarrassing situation like the one in question, i.e. making an offer to their superior, who as has been noted, is traditionally pictured as a man, the female respondents felt the need to overtly spell out what the reason behind the offer was. A possible explanation for it might be the same as the one which accounts for the fact that English-speaking women tend to use a more standard language – as Gordon claims; if they do not, they may be perceived as sexually promiscuous (after Trudgill 1983).

#### 3.2.2. The colleague

In relation to their colleague the women showed less variation with regard to the form than in the offers to their superiors. On the other hand some forms (though comparably very infrequent) in situation 2b) were new when juxtaposed with those in 2a),

and to both 2a) and b) in the case of the men. As observed at the beginning of this section, the female respondents generally opted for the same category of phrases in situation 2a and 2b, which was:

*Would you like a lift?* (38%)

The other of the two preferable ones in relation to the superior, i.e. *Can I give you a lift?* appeared, too, being recorded for 17% of the speakers, but in comparison to the previous dyad the number of examples was relatively low. The less frequent types were represented by interrogatives with *do*, suggestions made with the help of an interrogative (*Why don't I give you a lift?*), a few imperatives (*Jump in*), and a declarative.

When compared to the group of offers addressed to the superior, the offers to the colleague contained a markedly lower number of explanatory phrases. Thus, it is clearly the equality of status and solidarity rather than power difference that seems to exert the most conspicuous influence upon the formula used here, not so much the gender of the addressee, who in this case could be both a man or a woman.

## 4. Conclusions: formulas typically used as offers in English

The analysis of the data included in the previous sections will now constitute the basis for establishing whether, and if so, then in what way, the expressions identified as typical account for similarities and differences in terms of a) the character of the dyad (i.e. the power distance between the interlocutors), and b) the gender of the respondents. Thus, the concluding parts will be distributed according to the type of the dyad and the language it elicits.

### 4.1. Semi-formal (stranger – stranger) dyad

Two of the presented situations concerning the use of offers (specifically offers of help) were reactions of the respondents in relatively semi-formal situations. They were prompted by the fact that the speakers either did not know the addressee or there was usually a marked difference of age and/or power between them. These variables resulted in a fairly deferential form of the language selected, which was reflected in the interrogative form of the offers. In both cases when the British respondents addressed a senior lady and their superior, the formula most frequently utilised followed the pattern:

OFF: Que: Vmod + 1p + Vinf + 2p... (*Can / May I... (give you a hand, help you, give you a lift)?*)

Beside the above-mentioned one, the second of the two situations (situation 2) elicited also another type of offer, viz.

OFF: Que: Vmod + 2p + Vinf + Obj (*Would you like... (a lift)?*)

which in fact was preferred by the women, whereas the men favoured the former one. This formula did not appear to be as popular as that in situation 1, possibly due to the character of the encounter. The view of a senior person in need of assistance usu-

ally induces an immediate and resolute action, hence the speaker will less frequently ask for the person's preference or likes, which on the other hand is probable in the case of offering a lift. Both types of the most typically recorded formulas, however, take the interrogative form, i.e. they ask for the will/decision of the addressee, which is certainly an indication of positive politeness.

#### 4.2. The informal (intimate – intimate) dyad

When we compare the responses suggested in the second of the two dyads which calls for much greater informality, an interesting distinction between the men and the women can be observed. The female speakers did not seem to be affected in their language choice by the altered character of the dyad, and the form for which they showed most preference was still the same as the question in situations 1 and 2a, i.e.:

OFF: Que: Vmod + 2p + Vinf + Obj (*Would you like... (a lift)?*)

As has been mentioned, the male respondents, beside the limited use of the former formula, showed preference for the following forms:

OFF: Imp: Vinf (*Jump in, Hop in...*)

OFF: Decl: 1p + Vfut + 2p + Obj (*I'll give you a lift, I'll drive you...*)

OFF: Que: Vinf + Obj (*Fancy a lift?, Want a lift?*)

all of the three with an almost equal distribution.

This discrepancy can most likely be accounted for and at the same time corroborated by the theory that women (particularly English-speaking women) as a rule use a more correct and appropriate language than men do (cf. Trudgill 1983, Lakoff 1975). They also tend to ask and negotiate more, particularly in informal contexts (cf. Tannen 1991, Holmes 1995), i.e. they are more sensitive to what the others think, whereas men usually opt for offering solutions (Holmes 1995), which the imperative and declarative forms suggested above illustrate rather well. For them it is an indication of solidarity, moreover, as has been proved, men seem to attach higher value to the less prestigious forms of the language, contrary to women (cf. Trudgill 1983). This, on the other hand, leads to a conclusion that English-speaking women typically do not make any particular distinction between the way in which they turn to their superiors or strangers, and to their colleagues and friends, respectively, because they will as a rule try to maintain good relations with the interlocutor disregarding the type of power difference which exists between them.

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