Towards New Politeness Systems

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Based on the contextual variables *power* (P) and *social distance* (D) proposed in Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) seminal work in politeness, Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) developed three basic *politeness systems*. However, later research on the nature of the variable D evidences that it has different components. Whereas some pragmaticians have argued that one of these components, namely, *affect* (A), must be kept as a constituent of D, others defend that it should be understood as an independent parameter that interlocutors assess in order to determine the *weightiness* of *FTAs* (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987).

Taking this into account, the aim of this paper is to review the politeness systems proposed by Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) and suggest new ones. In order to do so, firstly, I will briefly summarise the main ideas of Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995). Secondly, I will review the components of the variable D and, finally, I will introduce a modification of Scollon and Scollon's (1983, 1995) initial politeness systems.

1. SCOLLON AND SCOLLON'S POLITENESS SYSTEMS

Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) believe that individuals bring about in interaction an initial set of unmarked assumptions about the social relationship they have with other individuals, which they term *politeness system*. From my viewpoint, this notion may be considered synonymous with the concept of *conversational contract* proposed by Fraser and Nolen (1981), i.e. a set of rights and/or obligations about social interaction formed by many different beliefs. Some of these beliefs may be altered during the course of communicative exchanges due to possible alterations of the context in which social interaction takes place or to the negotiation interlocutors may carry out. The influence of these assumptions is so important that they determine the type of linguistic strategies participants will resort to when encoding their messages. Furthermore, throughout interaction each participant may maintain or change the politeness system he or she perceives.

However, as opposed to Fraser and Nolen (1981), who do not make it clear how interlocutors establish or define their conversational contract, Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) think that there are three possible social relationships, which correspond to three kinds of politeness systems, based on the values interlocutors assign to two contextual variables: P and D. The first two politeness systems are symmetrical, whereas the third is asymmetrical.

Firstly, the two symmetrical politeness systems are determined by the inexistence of a difference between interlocutors in terms of their relative power. Thus, on the one hand, individuals may share a *deference* politeness system, in which they are aware of a certain social distance between them: "…participants are considered to be equals or near equals but treat each other at a distance" (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 44). This politeness system is determined by the low value of the variable P and the high value of D, so that it can be represented by the formula [-P, +D]. A clear example of this system is the case of two colleagues with the same professional status who do not know each other very well. The immediate consequence of the perception of this politeness system will be the mitigation of FTAs by means of *negative-politeness* or *off-record* strategies[2].

On the other hand, the second type of symmetrical system is a *solidarity* politeness system, where interlocutors do not perceive any social distance between themselves. In this system, D also has a low level, so it can be reflected in the formula [-P, -D]. An example of this system could be the case of two intimate friends who know each other for a long time and are on good terms. According to Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995), the existence of this system allows individuals to perform their FTAs baldly on the record or using *positive-politeness* strategies.

Secondly, the asymmetrical politeness system is determined by a difference between interlocutors in terms of P. Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) call it *hierarchical* politeness system, and individuals who share it are seen as having clearly different social statuses, as in

the relationship between an employer and an employee. The value assigned to D can be high or low, so that the formula that displays this system is [+P, +/-D]. On the one hand, this results in the performance of FTAs without redressive action or with positive-politeness strategies by the individual of higher status, and, on the other hand, in the need the individual of lower status feels to avoid FTAs, to perform them off the record or to compensate them by means of negative-politeness strategies.

In spite of this, Scollon and Scollon warn us that "In any particular case, of course, because of individual differences, differences in the imposition being advanced, or differences in the context, any strategy might be used by a speaker" (1983: 169). For this reason, it should be understood that the types of politeness strategies that are to be expected in each system are only predictions, which might or might not be confirmed throughout conversational exchanges.

As Lorés Sanz (1997-1998) comments, Scollon and Scollon's (1983, 1995) politeness systems reflect the fact that the weightiness of an FTA (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) is not the result of a process of addition in which interlocutors add the value of one variable to the value of (an)other(s), as may be deduced from Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) formula $Wx = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + Ix$. They interpret it as a process in which individuals simultaneously combine the values of both P and D. However, in my opinion, these systems only capture three possible social relationships between interlocutors, because they are derived from their assessment of only these two contextual variables, of which D has turned out to be rather complex. Recent research has shown that D groups several components that play a crucial role in social relationships. From my point of view, one of those components may contribute to a better definition of the politeness systems initially proposed by Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995). For this reason, I will review these components in the next section[3].

2. COMPONENTS OF D

Although there has been a certain disagreement among authors when referring to D as well as to its components, for they have used terms such as *solidarity* (e.g. Brown and Gilman 1960; Laver 1974), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) sustain that D makes manifest the symmetrical relationship between two (or more) interlocutors as a consequence of their respective knowledge of each other and their familiarity. However, these authors also emphasise that D has a pan-cultural social dimension "…which nevertheless h[as] 'emic' correlates" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 76). Thus, Spencer-Oatey (1996: 7) mentions that when many authors use this variable they mean social *similarity* or *difference* between interlocutors, their *frequency of contact*, the *time* during which they have known each other, their *familiarity*, a sense of *like-mindedness*, or positive or negative *affect*. According to her, this variable reflects a *horizontal* dimension that displays interlocutors' social closeness, which distinguishes it from the *vertical* dimension of P.

However, D has often been linked to P, so that "It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between Power and Distance and in fact some studies conflate the two" (Thomas 1995: 128). According to Lorés Sanz (1997-1998: 303), D has two main components that capture the different concepts mentioned by Spencer-Oatey (1996: 7): on the one hand, *frequency of contact*, which includes the interlocutors' familiarity and the time during which they have known each other, and, on the other hand, *affect*, which gathers a sense of like-mindedness and a feeling of positive or negative affect. Her conception of D is based on studies that show that familiarity or frequent contact between interlocutors do not necessarily involve a positive affective relationship between them. As examples of this, the author mentions the hypothetical case of the members of a same family between whom there is little or no affect at all despite their frequent contact, or the case of colleagues of work who, because of their envy or professional quarrels, do not experience affect either in spite of their daily contact.

Therefore, Lorés Sanz concludes that there may be a close connection between these two basic components of D, which she represents as follows:

> a) En general, solamente una cierta frecuencia de contacto puede hacer posible la existencia de una cierta relación de afecto o afinidad entre participantes. Sin embargo, una ausencia de contacto nunca traerá consigo una relación afectuosa.
> b) Por otra parte, el factor del afecto puede ser considerado más determinante en la elección de estrategias de cortesía lingüística que la propia frecuencia de contacto. Así, no podemos esperar estrategias de cortesía positiva, de acercamiento y solidaridad entre participantes cuando existe un componente de afecto negativo, por mucho que la frecuencia de contacto entre ellos sea alta. (1997-1998: 303)

3. MODIFICATIONS OF SCOLLON AND SCOLLON'S POLITENESS SYSTEMS

Lorés Sanz (1997-1998) suggests that Scollon and Scollon's (1983, 1995) politeness systems should be modified. Regarding the solidarity politeness system [-P, -D], she considers that the low value of D is due to a high frequency of contact and a high degree of affect between interlocutors. However, as regards the deference politeness system [-P, +D], she thinks that it must be assumed that two individuals who have a distant relationship may feel little affect or neutral affect. As a consequence, she proposes two modifications of this system: one in which the value of D stems from a low frequency of contact and neutral affect, and another in which its value is derived from a high frequency of contact and neutral or negative affect. The latter situation might be appreciated in the case of the members of some families or among some colleagues at work. Finally, concerning the hierarchical system [+P, +/-D], she believes that, as Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) put it, it displays a type of interaction where D has a low value because of a high frequency of contact and neutral affect. Therefore, Lorés Sanz (1997-1998: 310-311) proposes three other possibilities, in virtue of the two components of D mentioned above:

a) A situation where the value of D is low because of a high frequency of contact and positive affect between interlocutors, which would allow them to use positive-politeness strategies. This would be the case, for instance, of the relationship between some employers and their employees.

b) A context where the value of D is high because there is little frequency of contact between interlocutors and, therefore, their affect is neutral. This would be the case, for example, of the relationship between a general manager of a multinational company and his many subordinates.

c) A situation in which, despite interlocutors' high frequency of contact, the value of D is high because they feel negative affect, which is manifested in the reciprocal usage of negative-politeness strategies. As Lorés Sanz says, "Este contexto, además, es especialmente importante al ser terreno abonado para la aparición de la descortesía por parte del participante que se identifica como 'superior'" (1997-1998: 310).

In addition to Lorés Sanz (1997-1998), Suh (1999), Tanaka and Kawade (1982) or Thomas (1995) have also distinguished two aspects of D. Thus, they argue that there may be a *hierarchical distance* between interlocutors, marked by their social attributes or roles within certain social institutions, and/or a *psychological distance*, which is determined by their perception of factors such as age, intimacy, familiarity or gender. Hays (1984, quoted in Spencer-Oatey 1993: 94) also considers that D is related to the following factors:

a) *Companionship* of individuals, i.e., the extent to which they share an activity, experience, company or do something together.

b) *Consideration* (or *utility*), which indicates the extent to which an individual thinks that his interlocutor will help him by providing him with goods, services, or support in order to show his concern for his well-being.

c) *Communication* (or *self-disclosure*), since there may be an exchange, revelation or discussion of personal information, ideas, opinions or confidences about any topic.

d) *Affection*, which is manifested through expressing positive or negative sentiments by means of emotional expressions.

As regards affect (A), Brown and Gilman (1989), Coupland, Grainger and Coupland (1988),

Garcés Conejos (1995), Kopytko (1995) or Spencer-Oatey (1993, 1996, 2000) have highlighted the role affect plays in the determination of the weightiness of FTAs. Although Brown and Gilman (1989), Kopytko (1995) or Lorés Sanz (1997-1998) do not regard it adequate that affect be viewed as an independent variable to be added to those originally postulated by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) in their model, Garcés Conejos (1995: 51) defends that it should be considered as a contextual parameter that is independent from variable D. According to this author, the affect interlocutors experience may correspond to an increase or decrease in the level of politeness they use when encoding their FTAs. In the same vein, Spencer-Oatey sustains that "…*distance* and *affect* should be treated as separate parameters, since some research has indicated that *affect* has a separate and differential effect on language use from the influence of *distance*" (2000: 34). In fact, the studies carried out by Gómez Morón (1997), Held (1989), Kataoka (1995), Placencia (1996) or Watson (1999) confirm this hypothesis, since they make manifest that affect influences directly the linguistic encoding of politeness.

In the light of this, and if it is accepted that A directly influences interlocutors' assessment of the weightiness of FTAs and determines the selection of politeness strategies, I think that Scollon and Scollon's (1983, 1995) initial politeness systems could be modified and reformulated in the following way:

A) *Solidarity politeness system*: a system in which there is no difference between interlocutors in terms of power, their social distance is low and, as an essential requisite, they experience positive affect towards each other. This relationship could be reflected in the following formula: [-P, -D, +A].

B) *Deference politeness systems*:

1. *Deference politeness system with distance and neutral affect*, in which there is no power difference between individuals, their social distance is high – because of their low

frequency of contact or because they do not know each other very well – and their affective relationship may be either positive or neutral. This system could be captured by the formula [-P, +D, +/-A]. If interlocutors' affective relation becomes positive – because their frequency of contact increases – they might occasionally use positive-politeness strategies, while if their affective relation remains neutral, the appearance of these strategies could be reduced or replaced by negative-politeness strategies. Nevertheless, as Garcés Conejos (1995) emphasises, it should be borne in mind that the affect interlocutors experience will be reflected on the usage of both positive and negative politeness strategies in order to keep an interactional imbalance, for, as Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) explain, an excess of positive-politeness strategies may threaten their *negative face* and, vice versa, an excess of negative-politeness strategies may damage their *positive face*[4].

2. *Deference politeness system with proximity and negative affect*, where there is no power difference between participants, their social distance is low but their affective relationship is negative: [-P, -D, -A]. In this case, individuals may be expected to resort to negative-politeness strategies.

C) *Hierarchical politeness systems*:

1. *Hierarchical politeness system with distance and neutral affect*, in which there is a power difference between interlocutors, their social distance is high and their affective relationship may be either positive or neutral: [+P, +D, +/-A]. Within this system, the individual of higher status may address the inferior by means of positive-politeness strategies, whereas the inferior may employ negative-politeness strategies to address the superior.

2. *Hierarchical politeness system with proximity and neutral affect*, where there is a power difference between individuals, their social distance is low and their affective relationship

may be either positive or neutral: [+P, -D, +/-A]. In this system the tendency may be towards the usage of negative-politeness strategies, although they may be replaced or disappear in favour of positive-politeness ones as affect increases.

3. *Hierarchical politeness system with proximity and positive affect*, in which one of the interlocutors has more power than the other, there is low social distance between both and their affective relationship is positive: [+P, -D, +A]. In this context, positive-politeness strategies are to be expected from both parties.

4. *Hierarchical politeness system with distance and negative affect*, where there is a clear power difference and high social distance between interlocutors and they feel no affect towards each other [+P, +D, -A]. As a consequence, the prediction is that they may use negative-politeness strategies.

4. CONCLUSION

In my opinion, this new reformulation I have presented of politeness systems arising from the values participants in conversational exchanges assign to the three contextual variables considered – P, D, A – may be rather useful for a better understanding of the different possible social relationships within which they may interact. Although Scollon and Scollon's (1983, 1995) initial systems have the merit of explaining explicitly how interlocutors define their relationships, I have implemented their proposal following recent research in the field about the role of A. However, the fact that I have argued that a certain number of politeness systems are defined in terms of these three parameters should not exclude that other possible parameters are evaluated by interlocutors, and, if so, that there are other politeness systems. Consequently, further investigations should be done in order to elucidate their nature and role in social interaction.

But this discussion also raises further issues. As can be seen, the existence of a particular type

of politeness system may constrain the usage of certain communicative strategies. Since speakers select the strategy with which they are going to communicate their messages by relying on their perceptions of the contextual variables intervening in social interaction – and, therefore, their perception of a politeness system –, it could also be argued that they can also transmit information about the establishment, maintenance or modification of a politeness system by means of their utterances. Therefore, the problem that now needs solving is to explain how the speaker can transmit this kind of information, how the hearer can recover it, and what factors enable them to do so. From my point of view, a cognitive pragmatic approach can help resolve this issue.

NOTES

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2. See Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) for diagrams, a complete list and explanation of the different types of politeness strategies they propose.

3. For this revision of the components of D, I follow that done by Gómez Morón (1998).

4. According to Brown and Levinson, the concept of *negative face* refers to "…the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by other" (1987: 62), whereas that of *positive face* refers to "…the want of every member [of a society] that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (1987: 62).

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