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“Come sei elegante oggi!”: Positive politeness in Southern Europe.

The goal of this paper is to discuss some distinctive sociolinguistic characteristics of the European Mediterranean. More precisely, we will focus on the issue of politeness, since this stands out due to its deviancy. We will restrict our discussion to Spain, Italy and Greece. These European countries are positioned at the heart of the Mediterranean area and, as will become clear in the course of this paper, have much in common: culturally, linguistically and sociolinguistically.

In this paper we would like to cast some light on how a theory with universal claims, such as the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987), does not easily fit in a more Southern European linguistic context. Therefore, we will discuss refinements and alternative formulations of this theory, providing evidence based on data and previous studies of how politeness may be studied more fruitfully in the Mediterranean socio-cultural linguistic context.

According to various authors investigating the languages of the Mediterranean area, a tendency towards the so-called positive politeness practices has been observed (Hernandez-Flores 2004, Sifianou & Antonopoulou 2005, Haverkate 2004, Held 2005, Nuzzo 2009). This linguistic behaviour is frequently realised through special morpho-syntactic devices, e.g. use of diminutives in Greek (Sifianou & Antonopoulou 2005), use of specific verbal tense and mitigating modifiers in Italian (Bazzanella 2008; Vedder 2007). Additionally, a preference towards cooperative attitude has also been noted in turn-taking analysis and at the phrasal level this is attested by the frequent production of compliments and collaborative speech acts, strategies which are adopted in all the three languages under examination. Moreover, alternative categorisations of typical linguistic behaviour have been proposed by various authors, as the category of face-enhancing (e.g. Hernandez-Flores 2004)/face-flattering acts (e.g. Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004) and the concept of *confianza* (Hernandez-Flores 2004). These categorisations express typical traits of the Mediterranean linguistic behaviour, namely a friendly attitude and concern towards the addressee; in other words, they focus on a positive relationship between the interlocutors. They also indexes familiarity and inclusion of the interlocutor in a specific in-group, bringing the speakers closer to each other and making their relationship stronger.

Since these specific practices are scarcely reproduced in other parts of Europe, a re-examination of the Anglo-centric categories and most frequently used strategies are felt as needed. These specific linguistic behaviours and new categorisations have to be understood as central concepts interacting with the politeness productions of Mediterranean speakers, since they seem to be more present in these cultures and as such, they need to be actively involved in the study of politeness.

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