Abstract: In this article, we treat politeness as a feature of interpersonal conduct centred on the concept of face. We review Brown and Levinson's paradigm of politeness and the criticisms levelled against it for not being able to accommodate cultural variability. We also present the relative theory of politeness, an attempt to amend Brown and Levinson's face-management system with regard to universality and a system of culturally neutral semantic terms used in cross-cultural studies of face orientations.

Keywords: Politeness; Rapport; Face; Impoliteness; Face-work; Speech Acts

1. The concept of politeness

In very general terms, politeness is seen as a feature of interpersonal conduct whereby a person ‘shows regard for another person by trying to make that person feel comfortable or by making an obvious effort to avoid making that person feel uncomfortable’ (Green 1996: 148). This view of politeness has been called first order politeness (Allan and Salmani Nodoushan 2015; Capone and Salmani Nodoushan 2014; Salmani Nodoushan 2012; Salmani Nodoushan and Allami 2011).

Politeness theorists have studied at length the strategies employed by a speaker to promote and maintain harmonious relations by displaying consideration for one’s interlocutor’s feelings. What has emerged is a host of politeness theories and paradigms that could constitute a sub-field of pragmatics by themselves, as Thomas (1995) notes. She warns us that ‘politeness’ tends to be used as an umbrella term for different, though related, meanings and pertinently spells out the most common misunderstandings.

Thomas (1995: 150–6) refers to (i) politeness as a ‘genuine desire to be pleasant to others, or as the underlying motivation for an individual’s linguistic behaviour’; (ii) ‘deference’ as the opposite of familiarity, a reflection of the social conventions in a given situation; (iii) ‘register’ as linguistic variations conforming to the type of situation characterised in terms of formality vs. informality or intermediate degrees of either; (iv) politeness as an utterance level phenomenon with focus on surface linguistic forms associated with politeness, and (v) politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon, i.e. as a strategic linguistic choice intentionally made with a view to altering the relationship or challenging the status quo (See also Salmani Nodoushan 2012, 2013a,b, 2014a,b,c, 2015a,b, 2016, in press)

The following section reviews Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness, various receptive positions on it, and some alternative perspectives on politeness phenomena.

2. Brown and Levinson’s face-management model

Brown and Levinson (1978 [1987]) are the authors of the most influential model of politeness strategies. Their theory of politeness is centred on the concept of ‘face’, which, according to their own acknowledgement, is informed by Goffman’s (1967) classic account of politeness and the English folk notion of face.

Goffman is credited with introducing the concept of face, which he views as an image ‘located in the flow of events in the encounter’ (1967: 7) and sustained by other people’s judgements, rather than
as a private or internalised property. To secure this public image, parties to a conversation perform action in such a way as to reciprocally maintain and defend each other's face or self-image.

Goffman distinguishes between two kinds of face-work: (i) 'defensive' face-work, oriented towards saving the speaker's own face and (ii) 'protective' face-work, oriented towards saving the others' face. For the achievement of these interpersonal goals in conversation Goffman suggests two types of politeness strategies: (i) avoidance of face-threatening acts and (ii) use of redressive strategies. In short, the essence of Goffman's notion of face is an expression of a communion with others, i.e. of social relatedness (cf. ibid.: 14-23)—for more information on face-work, see Salmani Nodoushan 2006a,b, 2007a,b,c, 2008 a,b,c.

The English folk notion of face is connected with such phrases as 'to lose one's face' and 'to save one's face', meaning 'one's credit, good name, reputation'. But as Mao (1994), citing Ho (1975: 867), notes, the word 'face' is a literal translation of the two Chinese characters miànzi and liǎn. Indeed, it originally appeared in the phrase 'to save one's face' in the English community in China in the 19th century, but it incorporated the ways and strategies the Chinese usually adopted to avoid incurring shame or losing dignity, self-respect, and prestige. According to Ho's findings, 'to save one's face is not a Chinese idiom, but 'to give face' and 'to lose face' are. Mao opines that 'Brown and Levinson's failure to identify the original source of face, and to consider its impact upon their formulation of face, has consequences for their theory's claim to universality' (1994: 454).

Brown and Levinson construct a two-dimensional interactional model consisting of a speaker and an addressee, each of whom is endowed with positive and negative face. This implies that face is a two-sided construal that reflects two consubstantial human needs: (i) positive face, i.e. the need for approbation that guarantees the satisfaction of having one's values approved and of being appreciated and accepted by others, and (ii) negative face, i.e. the need for autonomy that conditions the interlocutor's freedom of action.

On Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, face is taken to be 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself' (1987: 61, emphasis added). It is obvious that their conception of face differs from Goffman's in that it is no longer public property granted to individuals by other people's judgement and perception of their interactional behaviour, but private property that intrinsically belongs to the self. Fraser (1990: 238-9) notes that the 'public' characteristic, which is essential to Goffman's analysis of face, seems to become an 'external' modifier or adjunct for this image, rather than an 'intrinsic' constituent of it.

Certain illocutionary acts are inherently face threatening to either the speaker or the addressee. Brown and Levinson call them face-threatening acts (FTAs). For example, such acts as complaints, criticism or insults threaten the addressee's positive face; apologising, confessing guilt or admitting responsibility can damage the speaker's positive face; offers, orders, requests, suggestions may impinge upon the hearer's freedom of action and harm his/her negative face; thanks and offers of help are a potential threat for the speaker's negative face. To minimise or eliminate such threats, the model suggests that speakers adopt various linguistic forms and politeness strategies whose selection depends on the degree of threat to which an act threatens the face of either participant.

Brown and Levinson anchor their model within Grice's model of conversation, which presents human communication as rational, purposeful and goal-oriented and communicators as sharing assumptions about politeness. They sustain that the function of the correlation of form/strategy with estimations of the potential face-threat is to focus the addressee's attention on the communicator's polite intentions. They see politeness as 'a precise semiotics of peaceful vs. aggressive intentions' and 'redressive action' as 'indicating clearly that (…) no face threat is intended or desired' (1983: 70). Then, what are the strategies put to use to counterbalance the threat to face that some illocutionary acts entail once it has been 'weighed'?

The speaker has five options: (i) to dispense with trading in face and perform the FTA without mitigation ('bald on record'); (ii) to perform the FTA 'on-record' with redress by means of a positive politeness strategy of making the hearer feel good, and feel that his/her values are shared; (iii) to choose a redressive negative politeness strategy by hedging, apologising, offering options, or asserting a desire to avoid interfering with the partner's freedom of action; (iv) to perform the face-
threatening act ‘off record’ by implicature, ‘giving hints’, ‘using metaphors’, or ‘being ambiguous or vague’, etc., thus giving the addressee the option of not acknowledging the extra meaning conveyed by that particular linguistic choice and strategy, and (v) to give up performing the threatening act altogether.

3. Receptive positions on Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face-management framework is, undoubtedly, the most comprehensive study of the significance of face as an interactional force that influences the outcome of the communicative acts we perform. Scollon and Scollon (1995) highlight the important role of the concept in understanding ‘how participants decide what their relative statuses are and what language they use to encode their assumption about such differences in status, as well as their assumption about the face being presented by participants in communication’ (1995: 34). It is only natural that their theory of politeness have been extensively discussed and criticised.

Brown and Levinson recognise that the content of face is culture specific and subject to cultural elaboration but maintain that the two basic face-wants that constitute it are universal. To them, cultural variability influences how polite behaviour is evaluated, that is, whether a culture is negative-politeness oriented or positive-politeness oriented, but it does not affect the content of positive and negative face (cf. 1987: 13). Many politeness theorists or researchers in cross-cultural communication have challenged their model mainly for not being able to stand up to cross-cultural scrutiny.

Janney and Arndt (1993) view Brown and Levinson’s theory as anchored within a specifically Anglo-Western cultural context that cannot subsume other faces manifested in some non-Western cultures. Scollon and Scollon (1995) observe that the idea of face as a self-image is not appropriate as the basis for Asian communication, as the self Asians project is ‘more collectivistic’ and, therefore, ‘more connected to membership in basic groups’ and ‘more strongly under the influence of assumed or unmarked cultural assumptions about face’ (1995: 36). In the same vein, Mao (1994: 472-3) notes that the Anglo-American concept of face and the Asian (Chinese and Japanese, more specifically) face are informed by two divergent ‘interactional ideals’, namely ‘individual autonomy’ and ‘social identity’, respectively, and that this difference underlies two different patterns of interactional cooperativeness.

Brown and Levinson’s theory has also been criticised for being constructed on the basis of speech act theory and Grice’s Cooperative Principle, which are both characterised by a philosophical analysis of sentences in isolation. The preoccupation with analysing the face-threatening potential of segregated speech acts lends the model a characteristic of constancy and predetermination. Hayashi (1996: 228) points out that ‘for a more comprehensive and convincing description of politeness phenomena, we need to analyse utterances within a larger linguistic context as strategic products of speaker’s discourse plans’.

This sort of criticism was also launched against the sentence-based speech act theory by researchers in Conversation Analysis, who argue that the meaning of an utterance is determined in most cases by the global conversational structure and local turn-by-turn organisation. Janney and Arndt (1992) are for an approach that treats politeness not as ‘a static logical concept’ but as ‘a dynamic interpersonal activity that can be observed, described, and explained in functional interactional terms’ (1992: 22).

Thomas (1995) brings arguments to support the criticism formulated above. She observes that a characterisation of speech acts as being threatening either to positive face or negative face of either the speaker or the addressee is untenable. In reality, the same utterance can be oriented simultaneously to both positive and negative face (e.g. Will you please shut up?), or one act can affect the face of both the speaker and the hearer as, for example, an apology, which involves some loss of face for the speaker, but which can also cause embarrassment to the addressee (cf. 1995: 176).

Similarly, an act like complimenting can attend not only to the hearer’s positive face, but also to the speaker’s positive face, by encouraging the partner’s ‘complimentary feedback’. What we have here
is not a case of face-saving and threat minimisation, but of face enhancement, which Brown and Levinson’s model does not accommodate. Instead, they characterise complimenting as a face-threatening act. Actually, this pessimistic and paranoic reasoning in approaching human social interaction has prompted additional criticism.

Sperber and Wilson (1995[1986]), Fraser (1990), and Jary (1998) target their criticisms at Brown and Levinson’s view of politeness as an implicated message, a view derived from Grice’s CP and its conversational maxims. For example, Jary (1998) notes that politeness, rather than being implicated, is most often anticipated on the basis of the expectation that certain sociocultural constraints on behaviour will be observed. An argument against Brown and Levinson’s ‘counterintuitive’ view is the fact that polite forms normally go unnoticed by the participants and that we unselfconsciously and sincerely comply with these norms of polite behaviour.

All these criticisms of the concept of politeness and the motivation that lies behind the communicator’s choices of face-management strategies called for revisiting and redefining the phenomenon of politeness. The following section looks at the theory of relative face orientation.

4. The theory of relative face orientation

We have discussed that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face-saving politeness theory has been undermined for its inability to be applied universally. In surveying recent studies in cross-cultural communication, Mao (1994) mentions Janney and Arndt (1993), who characterise it as idealistic, culturally biased, and lacking objective empirical evidence for the evaluation of their politeness universals. Instead of a theory centered on universals, they suggest that an alternative methodology based on cross-cultural politeness research would offer a more open and flexible perspective.

Mao (1994) has undertaken this task of constructing a framework for the analysis of other face dynamics. He starts from a contrastive study of Brown and Levinson’s and the Chinese and Japanese concepts of face to show why their account of politeness pragmatics is non-applicable to these cultures.

In Chinese, the literal meaning of the word ‘face’, that is, ‘the front part of the head’, is conveyed by two characters – miànzi and liǎn. These characters together encode a figurative sense related to the general concept of ‘reputable, respectable images that individuals can claim for themselves from communities in which they interact, or to which they belong’ (Mao, 1994: 457). The two characters, taken separately, refer to two particular aspects that are connected with the more general term of Chinese face: miànzi signifies ‘prestige, reputation, which is either achieved through getting on in life or ascribed (or even imagined) by other members of the community’; liǎn stands for ‘the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation, (…) the confidence of society in the integrity of ego’s moral character’ (ibid.). In defining the connotative meaning of ‘face’, the contemporary English dictionaries make reference to miànzi only: ‘a state of being respected by others’ (Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture 1992).

The collocations that miànzi and liǎn enter are ‘to lose miànzi’, ‘to lose liǎn’, ‘to give miànzi’, but not ‘to give liǎn’. ‘To lose liǎn’ is seen as more damaging than to ‘lose miànzi’ because it entails a sanction by the community for socially unacceptable conduct and it implies an automatic loss of miànzi. Mao draws our attention that, as opposed to Brown and Levinson’s definition of face, Chinese face ‘empathises not the accommodation of individual “wants” or “desires” but the harmony of individual conduct with the views and judgement of the community. As a public image, Chinese face depends upon, and is indeed determined by, the participation of others’ (Mao 1994: 460).

Mao tentatively relates miànzi to Brown and Levinson’s notion of ‘respect behaviour’ (1987: 129) associated with negative politeness, but he also emphasises the basic difference between them: the former is concerned with society’s recognition of one’s reputation, the latter with one’s self’s ‘territorial integrity’. The association of liǎn and positive politeness is more justified, at least at first glance, as both of them have in view an individual’s preoccupation with being liked and accepted by the other participants in interaction. Again, Mao identifies a difference between the two concepts:
'liăn is more socially situated than positive face; it embodies the imprimatur of the society as a whole rather than the “goodwill” of another individual’ (ibid.: 462).

Next, Mao relates the two aspects of Chinese face – mìanzi and liăn – to the Chinese conception of politeness – lĭmào. To be polite in Chinese discourse means, in many respects, ‘to know how to attend to each other’s mìanzi and liăn and to enact speech acts appropriate to and worth of such an image’ (ibid.: 463). Given the fact that such speech acts as ‘promising’, ‘inviting’, and ‘offering’ are not considered threatening to the addressee’s negative face as they are in Brown and Levinson’s view, we can infer that Chinese politeness is associated with a tendency to denigrate oneself and respect the others. For example, in Chinese, it is not impolite towards the addressee or humiliating for the speaker to make an insistent invitation even if the invitation has been declined initially.

Like Chinese face, Japanese face also places emphasis on social relationship and ‘communal interdependence’. The most evident proof for this orientation towards social interrelationships is the multitude of morphological and lexical devices for acknowledging the relationship between the discourse participants in Japanese. For example, a specific politeness strategy in Japanese is deferent imposition, as in the formula Dooza yorosiku onegaisimasu with the literal meaning I ask you to please treat me well/take care of me, a relation-acknowledging device uttered on being introduced to someone. By putting him/herself in a lower position, the speaker expresses deferent imposition, which, in effect, is an acknowledgement of interdependence. In this way, the good self-image of both the speaker and the addressee is enhanced.

Indeed, Brown and Levinson have identified this deferential verbal behaviour in Japanese culture, which prompted them to characterise it as negative-politeness oriented, but their idea of deference refers to an individual’s want to be free of imposition, while the Japanese conception of it is related to the hierarchical relationship between the communicators. This attitude is not conceivable in the European/North-American culture, at least in Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness. For the sake of comparison and contrast, the English equivalent Glad/Pleased to meet you is meant to stroke the positive face of the addressee by conveying intimacy.

Mao’s comparative survey leads to the conclusion that the Chinese and Japanese concept of face is informed by ‘a centripetal force’, as it ‘gravitates toward social recognition and hierarchical interdependence’, while face as analysed by Brown and Levinson is informed by ‘a centrifugal force, because Anglo-American face spirals outward from individual desires or wants, and sees the self as the initiating agent’ (Mao 1994: 471, original emphasis). These two different forces underlie two different face orientations that influence the discourse characteristic of the two cultures.

Following these remarks, Mao has developed an alternative interactional framework that is capable of accommodating these apparently divergent characterisations of face – the ‘relative face orientation’ construct. This theory runs as follows: ‘an underlying direction of face that emulates, though never completely attaining, one of two interactional ideals that may be salient in a given speech community: the ideal social identity, or the ideal individual autonomy. The specific content of face in a given speech community is determined by one of these two interactional ideals sanctioned by the members of the community’ (ibid.: 472).

Mao glosses the meaning of ‘unattainable’ used in relation to either ideal: in the process of constructing their ‘selves’, individuals are continually in the pursuit of one ideal or another. Mao also draws our attention to the fact that her framework allows for the two ideals to ‘compete for saliency in a given speech community’ and warns us that the predominant orientation towards one ideal does not preclude the other orientation: ‘the other “eclipsed” ideal does not always remain in the background, and it may, whenever appropriate, be represented, in varying degrees, in some discourse activities within the same community’ (ibid.).

Mao makes it clear that this interactional framework should not be viewed as an abstract construct associated with the CP, but as a situational construct that resembles Goffman’s conception of it, namely one that is ‘located in the flow of events in the encounter’ (1967: 7). The relative face orientation theory encompasses two views of the self, which epitomise, according to Markus and Kitayama (1991: 229-30), ‘the most general and overarching schemata of the individual’s self-
system’ and influence the cognitive processes and the emotional and motivational behaviour of individuals holding them.

A similar view is held by Wierzbicka (1991) and other researchers in contrastive pragmatics, who use culturally-neutral semantic concepts to formulate cultural scripts of conversational behaviour.

5. The cross-cultural perspective on politeness

The cross-cultural or contrastive approach with its roots in the anthropological method of cross-cultural juxtaposition investigates comparatively the separate structural aspects of a language or forms of language-in-use (e.g. rhetoric patterns, the sequential organisation of speech acts, patterns of openings and closings in conversations, laughter, interruptions, etc.) and how they are related to the socio-cultural norms that are specific to a social community. An interesting model of cross-cultural analysis within the tradition of culture-specific anthropological studies of meaning making is Wierzbicka’s (1991) application of the universal semantics of human interaction to cross-cultural pragmatics.

Wierzbicka’s main concern is to do away with the ethnocentrically biased metalanguage engaged in describing cultural specificity and comparing discursive structures across cultures. She and other co-researchers (Wierzbicka 1991; Goddard and Wierzbicka 1994, 1997) have developed the ‘natural semantic metalanguage’ framework for the analysis of ‘cultural scripts’, i.e. norms of speaking. Their approach challenges the classic culture-specific concepts used in the so-called universal maxims and principles of conversational conduct.

Wierzbicka (1991) contends that such terms as ‘directness’, ‘indirectness’, ‘self-assertion’, ‘sincerity’ ‘harmony’, ‘solidarity’, ‘modesty’, ‘imposition’, ‘intimacy’, ‘informality’, etc. used to account for different conversational analysis as if they were self-explanatory can create confusion, as they do not have the same meaning in all cultures. Moreover, some languages do not even have corresponding words for all these terms, e.g. there is no word for ‘self-assertion’ in Japanese, Italian, French, Polish or Russian (cf. 1991: 71).

Following this remark, Wierzbicka makes a strong methodological case for the use of universally reliant semantic constructs that can be translated in all languages, such as ‘say’, ‘think’, ‘want’, ‘know’, ‘good’ ‘bad’, ‘people’, ‘someone’, ‘something’, ‘this’, ‘no’. Goddard and Wierzbicka reason that this universal metalanguage is useful both for a semantic analysis and for a formulation of cultural scripts that ‘can capture culture-specific attitudes, assumptions and norms in precise and culture-independent terms’ (1997: 237).

For example, Wierzbicka (1991) contrasts the attitude of Anglo-American and Japanese cultures to ‘self-assertion’ and conceives the following underlying conceptual structures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese culture</th>
<th>don’t say: ‘I want this’, ‘I don’t want this’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-American</td>
<td>do say: ‘I want this’, ‘I don’t want this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese culture</td>
<td>don’t say: ‘I would/wouldn’t like (want) this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-American</td>
<td>do say: ‘I would/wouldn’t like (want) this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese culture</td>
<td>don’t say: ‘I think this/I don’t think this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-American culture</td>
<td>do say: ‘I think this/I don’t think this’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This attitude of reserve or restraint, which represents a key value in Japanese culture (called *enryo*), cannot be applied to Anglo-American culture, just as the notion of ‘self-assertion’ has no corresponding value in the other culture.

Wierzbicka uses these different interactional norms to account for the differences in linguistic structures characteristically engaged in the two cultures. Thus, as self-assertion is generally encouraged in Anglo-American culture as long as this does not threaten personal autonomy, i.e. negative face, one is allowed to say ‘I want this’, but not ‘I want you to do this’. In Wierzbicka’s view, this explains the use in directives of such linguistic formulae as interrogative structures (also
called ‘whimperatives’, e.g. Will/Would/Can/Could you do this?), which combine the two components in recognition of the addressee’s right to freedom from imposition.

Conversely, as Matsumoto (1988) observes, in Japanese, it is polite behaviour to address direct requests to an interlocutor, as by doing so one acknowledges being dependent on the other’s care and attention. It follows that bare imperatives in Japanese are interpreted differently than in English, namely as an expression of deference by placing oneself in a lower position rather than a restriction on our interlocutor’s freedom of action. The dependence acknowledging imperative is in most of the cases accompanied by expressions of respect.

In their contrastive description of case studies of discourse, Wierzbicka (1991) and Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997) construct cultural scripts of discourse preferences in Japanese, Chinese, Hebrew, Polish, Italian, as well as black English and white English, Japanese, Polish and Malay. Below, we exemplify with the representations of different attitudes to saying ‘no’ in Anglo-American, Israeli, and Japanese cultures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Israeli culture</td>
<td>I say: ‘No’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think I don’t have to say anything more about it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-American culture</td>
<td>I say: ‘No’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t want you to feel something bad because of this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will say something more about it because of this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese culture</td>
<td>I can’t say: ‘No’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will say something else because of this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can conclude that while an Anglo-American may appear direct or blunt to a Japanese interlocutor, the former may label an Israeli as blunt and direct. This preoccupation with the avoidance of such relative and vaguely defined terms as ‘direct’, ‘blunt’, etc. in the contrastive characterisation of speech patterns across cultures provides us with a more valid general picture of differences in speech habits.

6. Conclusion

The core of all the theories surveyed in this section is related to the social and psychological constraints that people abide by in interaction. Brown and Levinson’s face-saving model is intended to provide an explanation of the strategic linguistic expression of politeness with a view to mitigating the threat to face that some illocutionary acts may entail. However, their account of politeness has been widely criticised for being grounded in a specific cultural milieu and not being ‘universal’ enough to allow for other characterisations of face. The two alternative interactional frameworks discussed herein amend Brown and Levinson’s model with respect to universality.

The theory of the relative face orientation provides a solution to cultural differences in the conception of face. It is based on the assumption that face is a public image that individuals claim for themselves by emulating an ideal social identity or aspiring towards an individual autonomy. The relative face orientation scheme maintains the concept of face but widens the scope of the classic face-management theory. It provides a more generous and flexible construct that allows for both the public-oriented Chinese and Japanese face and the self-oriented face described by Brown and Levinson. The framework does not rule out a competition for saliency in the image that we want to project in the actual flow of interaction and thus accounts for the manifestation in various degrees of both orientations in ongoing interaction.

Wierzbicka’s natural semantic metalanguage perspective is consonant with Mao’s (1994) relative face orientation theory, which constitutes a similar attempt at democratising the terms used in cross-cultural studies of face orientations. The theory of cultural scripts based on lexical universals lends the theory of relative face orientation a more concrete and palpable character, helping us to establish a connection between cultural values and speaking rules, or discourse styles.
References


