Politeness in the Simpsons: a pragmatic study

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Abstract:

Politeness is the act of showing good manners toward others. It is done through certain strategies all employed for the same purpose. Politeness has been studied in different places and data.

The Simpsons is good and rich with situations where the strategies of politeness are employed. This study has set itself the task of investigating politeness strategies in the Simpsons dialogues.

It concludes that that the characters in the Simpsons use different strategies of politeness to show that they are polite and they are not aggressive towards the other. The most frequent strategy used in the dialogues studied is indirect politeness.

Key terms:

Politeness, strategies, bald-on-record, Simpsons.

1.1. Introduction

The practical application of excellent manners or etiquette to avoid offending others is politeness. It is a phenomenon that is culturally defined, therefore what is deemed polite in one society may occasionally be rather rude or merely eccentric in another (Beeching, 2002: 65).

Although the aim of politeness is to avoid objectionable behavior in order to avoid offending others and to make everyone feel at ease and comfortable with one another, these culturally set standards occasionally may be distorted (ibid).

Politeness is a set of verbal and nonverbal cues that people use to show that they are considerate of others' feelings about how they should be treated. Politeness is an important interpersonal interactional phenomena because it aids in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (ibid). Politeness operates through evaluative moments, or the interactants' (or other participants') judgements of interactional conduct.

The operation of politeness incorporates valences: when people conduct in a way that they believe to be courteous in a particular context, they strive to enact shared values with others, so evoking positive emotions. The interactants employ valenced categories as a standard for language and behavior creation and evaluation, and valence represents the participants' opinions of the moral hierarchy within an interactional context or occurrence.

The interactants use valenced categories as a benchmark for their production and evaluation of language and behavior, and valence reflects the participants' perceived moral order of an interactional context/event, that is, their perceptions of 'how things should be' in a given situation (ibid).

As a result, investigating politeness provides insight into the larger in-group, societal, and cultural norms that support people's constructive and judgmental interpersonal behavior. The study of politeness sheds light on the social practices that surround individual language use since politeness is a social activity that combines linguistic and non-linguistic components and embodies a social practice (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 23).

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, pragmatics-based study on politeness has grown to become one of the discipline's most well-liked subfields. Various methodological and theoretical advancements have been made in the field.

These include the "first wave" of study on politeness, during which scholars either tried to model politeness across languages and cultures by employing universal frameworks, or they critiqued such frameworks based on the culture in question. Researchers attempted to treat politeness as an individualistic, frequently idiosyncratic, interactionally co-constructed phenomena during the "second wave" of politeness research (ibid).

Since politeness can only be researched at the micro-level of the individual, the second wave makes the case that it would be overly ambitious to try to model this phenomenon across languages and cultures. The "third wave" of politeness research involves models of politeness that aim to account for politeness in different languages and cultural contexts without sacrificing the goal of studying politeness as an interactionally formed phenomena. (ibid).

1.2. Types of politeness

From Erving Goffman's idea of face, anthropologists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson distinguished two types of politeness:

a. negative politeness is a request can be made less intrusive by using phrases like "If you don't mind" or "If it isn't too much trouble," which respects the individual's right to pursue their own interests. That is to say, respect. The usage of indirect speech acts has increased. Also regarded as a component of assertiveness (ibid).

b. Non-assertive politeness: the practice of refraining from speaking out or making an assertion during a conversation in order to be considerate to the other participants. Additionally, when a person agrees to a decision made by another in order to avoid coming out as rude (ibid).

c. Assertive politeness is the practice of expressing one's opinions in a supportive and useful manner in order to assist and facilitate a conversation. Alternatively, to avoid offending people by refraining from agreeing with something they do not genuinely agree with.

d. Positive politeness aims to build goodwill among participants and acknowledges that everyone wants to be liked and understood. Because they (ibid) demonstrate awareness that the relationship is strong enough to handle what would typically be deemed rude (in the public meaning of the term), direct speech acts, cursing, and defying Grice's maxims can be regarded components of positive politeness.

They express understanding of the other person's values, which satisfies the person's need for acceptance. One of these styles of politeness appears to be more valued in some cultures than the other. In this way, politeness is bound by culture (Beeching, 2002: 67).

1.3. Politeness and face

Since Brown and Levinson's (1987) groundbreaking work, face—a person's public self-image—has been a central focus in politeness study. Erving Goffman's (1967, p. 12) work is where Brown and Levinson took face, as well as the idea of politeness as an interpretation of face-work. In this work, the term "facework" refers to "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face." According to Goffman's theory, face-work encompasses a wide range of techniques, such as avoidance and corrective face-work.

These (corrective and avoidance) forms of face-work were given precedence by universalist theories of politeness, but many other Goffman-identified features of face-work were left out.

Even though Goffman himself notes that face-work has a strong emotive component, the ideas of meeting others' face requirements and safeguarding one's own face have been handled predominantly through the concept of rationality that is considered to be part of the CP's mode of operation.

The rationality of emotions differs from the premeditated character of 'rationality' in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987), as social psychologists such as Haidt (2012) contend.

Many academics questioned the obvious link between face and politeness following the development of the second wave of politeness studies. More specifically, while it's possible that no researcher has disputed that politeness and face are closely related phenomena, Bargiela-Chiappini's 2003 ground-breaking research demonstrated that face function and face-work cannot be merely grouped under politeness. In fact, as a recent edited collection by Bargiela-Chiappini and Haugh (2010) has insightfully demonstrated, it is even possible to do face research without stepping into the area of etiquette. (Holmes, 1995: 90).

1.4. Politeness strategies

When face-threatening activities are unavoidable, Brown and Levinson suggest using four major tactics to reduce the threat to the listener's face. These tactics are typically employed to prevent embarrassing or upsetting someone. Bald on-record, Positive politeness, Negative politeness, and Off-record (indirect) are the four politeness tactics suggested by Brown and Levinson (ibid).

1. Bald on-record

The menace is not intended to be limited to the listener's face in the Bald on-record strategy. When there is a sense of urgency, if we know the listener well, or if there is a low chance of threat to the listener's face, we typically adopt this method. When we employ this tactic, we avoid using any auxiliary language to help soften our message and instead get right to the point (ibid).

"Be careful!" – A feeling of urgency.

It says, "Your headlights are on!" - In the listener's best interests.

"Eat up!" If the speaker and the listener did not already know one another, this command might come across as face-threatening. However, this might be considered fine if the speaker and the audience are acquainted.

The benefits of this tactic include gaining praise for being sincere, preventing misunderstandings by not using needless verbiage, and applying pressure to the listener in front of others when necessary (ibid).

1. Positive politeness

The goal of positive politeness techniques is to lessen the danger to the listener's good face. Finding common ground, contrasting criticism with compliments, cracking jokes, and using expressions of friendship (think of nicknames, lingo, or inside jokes that only you and your pals use) are all examples of positive politeness methods. By emphasizing friendliness and civility, these tactics help the listener feel good about themselves and prevent offense or conflict (Ide, 1989: 34).

Hey buddy, may I borrow five dollars? - Speaking in a cordial tone.

"Your hair looks amazing, and I really like your shoes. However, I'm not sure how I feel about that top.- Pairing a compliment with a critique.

"*Oh, you played this word wrong. Don't worry, I spell things wrong all the time!* " - Finding common ground.

This tactic has advantages such as fostering a stronger sense of mutual support between speaker and listener and reducing social distance. (ibid).

2. Negative politeness

Negative politeness techniques are intended to avoid any imposition on the listener and are directed towards their negative face. When we believe that the listener will feel unpleasant or embarrassed as a result of our speech and want to avoid those feelings, we utilize negative politeness techniques. utilizing hedging (a term or phrase that lessens the force or assertiveness of a statement), limiting the imposition, apologizing, being indirect, and utilizing inquiries rather than demands are a few examples of these tactics (ibid).

Eg:

I doubt you are aware of the location of the restrooms. - Hedging and being evasive.

Would you please print this for me? It won't take long because there are only a few pages. - Lessening the burden.

I'm sorry, but could you please assist me? - Expressing regret.

3. Off-record (indirect)

The off-the-record or indirect method is the fourth politeness tactic proposed by Brown and Levinson. The speaker often refrains from mentioning the possibly face-threatening behavior outright while employing this method, which includes some significant indirectness.

The listener must decide how to interpret the inferred intentions of the speakers. In this case, the speaker can be praised for not imposing, and the listener has the opportunity to come across as helpful or kind. To transmit the intended meaning, this method, however, strongly relies on pragmatics (Holmes, 1995: 67).

"Is there a free chair over there?" the speaker asks.

Yes, here it is, says the listener. The speaker is given a chair.

The speaker says, "I have a headache."

Reader: "Oh no. Take a few of my painkillers here.

Since the speaker never makes a request in any scenario, the burden on the audience is lessened. The benefits of this tactic include gaining praise for being diplomatic and escaping liability for a potentially embarrassing action (ibid).

1.5.   Data collection and description

For the Fox Broadcasting Company, Matt Groening created the American animated series The Simpsons. The Simpson family, which comprises of Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, serves as the series' satirical representative of everyday life in America. The program mocks American culture and society, television, and the human condition while taking place in the made-up town of Springfield (Matsumoto, 1988: 56).

Groening and producer James L. Brooks came up with the family just before a solicitation for a collection of animated shorts. Using Bart in place of his own name, he invented a dysfunctional family and gave the characters those members' first names; he believed Simpson was a humorous name because it sounded close to "simpleton."The shorts were included in The Tracey.

The show has had 745 episodes air since it began on December 17, 1989. It is the longest-running American animated series, American sitcom, and American scripted primetime television series in terms of both the amount of seasons and episodes. The Simpsons Movie, a full-length motion picture that debuted in theaters on July 27, 2007, earned more than $527 million; as of 2018 (ibid.), a sequel is now in the works.

In addition, the series has given rise to a sizable merchandising sector and a number of comic book series, video games, books, and other associated media. Gracie Films and 20th Television collaborated on The Simpsons.

Seasons 33 and 34 of the television show were revealed to contain 22 episodes each on March 3, 2021, bringing the total number of episodes from 706 to 750. The first episode of the 34th season aired on September 25, 2022. The television show was renewed for its 35th and 36th seasons, totaling 51 episodes, on January 26, 2023. The remaining 44 episodes will be produced over the production cycle of the upcoming seasons, increasing the cumulative number of episodes for the program to 801 (ibid). Seven episodes are carryovers from season 34.

Throughout the early seasons of The Simpsons in the 1990s—often referred to as its "golden age"—it gained considerable praise. It has now drawn criticism for what is thought to be a drop in quality. The A.V. Club's Erik Adams called it "television's crowning achievement regardless of format" and Time rated it the best television series of the 20th century. The Simpson family received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on January 14, 2000. Since it first aired as a series, it has garnered numerous honors, including 35 Primetime Emmy Awards, 34 Annie Awards, and 2 Peabody Awards. The Simpsons has impacted numerous following adult-oriented animated sitcom television programs, and Homer's exclamatory catchphrase "D'oh!" has been incorporated into the English language (ibid).

1.6.   Data analysis

The data scrutinized will be analyzed according to the strategies mentioned previously.

1.6.1. Text one

[1] Marge. [1.1] Dear Simpson family friends: This year was mixed with happiness and sadness. [1.2] The melancholy comes first. [1.3] After being abruptly run over, our kitten Snowball passed away and entered catnip paradise. However, we recently acquired a new kitten named Snowball II, so I suppose life goes on. Snowball II is caught in the wires when Homer takes the Christmas lights out of the box.

Snowball II [2]. Miaow!

[3] Marge. [3.1] As for life continuing, Grampa is still with us and as feisty as ever.

On the wall is a portrait of Grampa, who has a grave expression on his face..

"Maggie is walking by herself," says [3.2]. Only a few steps are possible for Maggie before she trips over once more. [3.3] "Bart... Well... We love Bart. Lisa got straight As.

[3.4] Everyone has been affected by the charm of the season.

[4] Homer. Marge! Why haven't you completed that pointless letter yet?

[5] Marge. "Homer wishes you well. Merry Christmas.

[6] Homer. Marge!

[7] Marge. The "Simpsons." (adapted from http://www.twiztv.com/)

Analysis

The "The Simpsons Christmas Special" pilot episode is where the letter scene that is the subject of this article is taken from. The episode features several stereotypical Christmas scenes, as implied by its title, including the school pageant, gift-shopping, and singing carols with the family. However, as is characteristic of the TV series, not only are those scenes parodied and their typical themes exaggerated or reversed, but they are also juxtaposed with uncommon season sequences like getting and removing a tattoo and placing bets at the dog track.
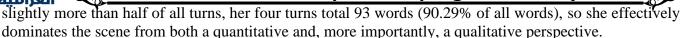
When Marge writes the family's holiday notes to their friends, it is one of the overused Christmas situations that is humorously flipped. The action takes place at home, in the living room, which is the hub of the family's activities and where parents and kids are typically seen spending the majority of their time together. In reality, the entire family is together there celebrating Christmas: Homer is organizing the decorations in the "Xmas Box" as Lisa and Bart are writing their shopping lists on the ground and Maggie the toddler is calling for her mother. Marge, however, reads the letter she is writing in her head rather than out loud.

Marge reads the family greetings silently, indicating that they are truly her own greetings. Reading her letter aloud would give her husband and children the opportunity to accept, reject, or negotiate its contents and, most importantly, would prevent her from verbally creating a perfect identity for herself and for her imperfect family. On the one hand, this may be interpreted as the woman performing her allegedly female tasks as a mainstream model homemaker, namely, performing the emotional and intimate duty of keeping in touch with their friends and connections. However, as will be demonstrated further below, Homer's real actions and the few words he said also cast doubt on the beautiful picture painted in her welcome.

Seven turns and 103 words make up the letter scene. Marge speaks four times (57.14 percent of all turns), Homer twice (28.57 percent), and their cat Snowball II once (14.29 percent); even though she speaks

slightly more than half of all turns, her four turns total 93 words (90.29% of all words), so she effectively dominates the scene from both a quantitative and, more importantly, a qualitative perspective.

Marge depicts her microcosm and makes a suggestion about her conventional ideology by including all of the members of her family in her letter, from her cat (sentence 1.4) to Homer's father (sentence 3.1), from her three children (sentences 3.2 and 3.3) to her husband (turn 5).

The woman addresses her letter to "Dear friends of the Simpson family" in sentence 1.1 ("Dear friends of the Simpson family: We had some sadness and some gladness this year"). This referring expression is so broad that it appears to include not only an indefinite number of the TV series' fictional protagonists but also its actual viewers, revealing that the letter is a diegetic pretext to present the figure of Marge and her moral principles. We had some pain and some joy this year, which is the major clause/finite clause of the first turn's opening phrase. This sentence performs communication duties by introducing and summarizing the numerous subjects covered in the text.

1.6.2. Text 2

One trick is to tell them nonsensical tales... like the time I traveled to Shelbyville via ferry. I chose to travel to Morganville, which was then known as Shelbyville, because I needed a new heel for my shoe. So, in keeping with the fashion of the day, I fastened an onion to my belt. Now, a nickel was required to ride the boat, and back then, nickels had images of bumblebees. You'd say, "Give me five bees for a quarter." Where were we before? Yes, the fact that I wore an onion-type belt, which was in style at the time, was crucial. White onions were unavailable due to the war.

Analysis

The characters were divided into two groups: those who appeared in just one episode and those who appeared in several. Characters with more lines typically appear in the middle of the episode, according to a plot of the (scaled) number of lines for each character on the y axis. This makes sense because they talk so much that their average episode time will be just around the midpoint.

The Springfield Nuclear Power Plant, Moe's Tavern, and Springfield Elementary School are evidently the three locations that appear most frequently during the program (Homer works there). I should note that the Simpson house was not included in this plot because it would have dominated the area.

They discuss Texas, California, Alaska, Florida, Washington, and even Nebraska frequently. I might mention that we ought to pay closer attention to the figures for Washington. There may be other instances where the words "Washington D.C." or "George Washington" were used without necessarily referring to the state; I filtered out lines that contained these terms.

This is good because the typical issues with heat maps of the US are not there. Because the thing we wish to depict is typically correlated with the population, these plots frequently transform into population density plots. We should not anticipate (and did not experience) this issue, though, because we are examining a metric that is not truly connected to the population.

1.7.   Conclusion

According to the study's findings, the characters in The Simpsons employ several politeness techniques to demonstrate that they are considerate of one another and nonaggressive. In the dialogues that were investigated, indirect courtesy was the most common tactic adopted.

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