

Introduction

My main aim in this book is to develop a more community-based, discourse-level model of both gender and linguistic politeness and the relation between them. This is in marked contrast to an almost exclusive focus on the individual in most analyses of politeness. At the same time as describing what gender and linguistic politeness are and how they function, my aim is also to question the stability and solidity of these entities. Instead, I see them as processes or acts of evaluation which people perform in conversation. This process model does not mean that I see gender and politeness as ephemeral or without material effects, but rather indicates that I want to move research away from the notion that politeness or gender consist of a range of stable, predictable attributes. At the same time as radically questioning the nature of gender and politeness, I shall also examine the role of stereotype in the process of assessing people's linguistic performance, both stereotypes of gender and of politeness. My principal question underlying this study is: how can we develop a complex, pragmatic model of interaction which can account for the way that gender, in its interactions with other variables like race, class, age, sexual orientation, contextual elements, and so on, inflects the production and interpretation of linguistic politeness and impoliteness? Crucial to this project is a wider critique of many of the linguistic models available at present. My dissatisfaction with models of language production and interpretation developed within linguistics, and also with models of gender formulated within feminist theory, has led me to try to find new ways of approaching the analysis of politeness.

Linguistic politeness lies implicitly at the heart of a great deal of gender and language research, from Lakoff (1975) onwards – the

notion that women are more polite or deferent than men underlies the analysis of a range of linguistic features, from tag-questions to directives. My aim in this book is to foreground and challenge these stereotypical assumptions about gender, and to develop a new, more contextualised form of analysis, reflecting the complexity of both gender and politeness, and also the complex relation between them. Theorists such as Holmes (1995), who asserts that women are more positively polite than men, have tended to adopt a very functional form of analysis, whereby they argue that particular language items or strategies can be simply classified as polite. This enables such linguists to undertake quantitative research and measure whether women are more polite than men. However, this assumption that politeness can be so easily codified is one which I contest, since it is only participants in specific communities of practice who are competent to judge whether a language item or phrase is polite for them or not.

Linguistic model

In this study, I shall be drawing largely on critical work which has been undertaken in feminist linguistics, and which can be broadly termed Third Wave feminist linguistics, in order to question current gender and language research which tends to remain at the utterance level of analysis and focuses on the language production of individual speakers (Christie, 2000; Cameron, 1998a; Mills, forthcoming, b; Bergvall, Bing, and Freed, 1996). Third-Wave feminist linguistics is a form of anti-essentialist analysis which is critical of Second Wave feminist linguists such as Dale Spender, Robin Lakoff, and Deborah Tannen for their focus on a homogeneous 'women's language' which they assume is the result either of the oppression of women or of the different socialising of women and men (Spender, 1980; Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1991).¹ The type of analysis which is developed within this book is more concerned with the analysis of the role of gender in language production and interpretation. It is concerned not with the individual utterance but with the co-constructed nature of talk within a particular context; therefore it is more influenced by work within pragmatics which focuses on the interaction of individuals and context (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; Christie, 2000). I have also drawn on critical work in integrational linguistics, such as Toolan (1996), which forces us to reassess our

presuppositions in constructing models of language production and interpretation. Rather than assuming that males and females speak differently, I have critically modified Wenger's (1998) term 'community of practice', which is concerned with analysing groups of people who are drawn together in the performance of a particular task. This notion of community of practice has been particularly influential in feminist linguistics, as can be seen in the articles in the special issue on the notion of community of practice and gender in *Language in Society* (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998, and 1999). This work aims to produce a more context-based model of gender, where gender construction is constrained by its negotiations with suppositions of community rules of appropriacy and stereotypes. I argue that Eckert and McConnell's modified notion of community of practice is insufficient to describe the complex negotiations which take place between individual speakers and the various linguistic communities of which they are members, simply because that model views that interaction as governed largely by constraint (Eckert and McConnell, 1998, 1999). In this book I map out the ways in which individuals negotiate with what they assume are community-of-practice norms for linguistic behaviour.

I draw on a model of the relation between speakers and their communities which is more concerned with the discourse level (that is the level of structures above the utterance). A concern with analysis at the discourse level is one common to many discourse analysts. However, because discourse is often used in very vague ways by theorists, it is important to be clear what I mean by discourse level here. My model of discourse is one informed by the work of Michel Foucault in that I regard the production and interpretation of language as rule governed – governed at a level which is not within the control of individual speakers or indeed of institutional forces (Mills, 1997, and forthcoming, a). However, because this model often presents a view of the individual speaker as simply the intersection or the effect of discursive forces, I have tried to reinscribe the role of individuals, without falling prey to the liberal humanism which often accompanies concerns with the individual speaker. I am concerned with the negotiation that takes place between individual speakers and their communities of practice and the wider society, which Bourdieu's (1991) notion of 'habitus', particularly as modified by Eelen (2001), seems to capture. I argue that there is a productive conflict within communities of practice, and that

communities of practice are not as hermetically sealed as Eckert and McConnell seem to suggest in their work (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1999). The norms of one community often spill over into another because group members belong to many different linguistic communities and sub-groups, and members do not necessarily feel comfortable or welcome within particular communities of practice (Bucholtz, 1999b). Furthermore, community members do not necessarily agree on which forms of behaviour are the dominant ones in any particular community of practice. Since the boundaries of linguistic communities are not clearly demarcated, there is a certain fluidity in what is considered by each member to be appropriate. Communities of practice are in a constant process of change, determined by the actions and assessments of individual members in relation to the group. The notion of change brought about by individual members of the group in relation to perceptions of group norms is important in thinking about how individuals and groups assess politeness. As I discuss in chapter 2, appropriateness is a problematic concept but one which informs linguistic production and interpretation. At the level of individual speakers, the assessment of appropriateness is important, but within a community of practice there might be a wide variety of judgements around the notion of what is and is not appropriate. Eelen's work is important in seeing the dynamic nature of the judgement of appropriacy in relation to linguistic acts, but what I should like to add to his work is the sense of the role of stereotype, and the force of this on our own negotiations with notions of appropriacy (Eelen, 2001). I also feel that it is important to analyse the force of the wider societal and institutional pressures on individuals and the negotiations which individuals engage in with forces beyond the level of the community of practice. It is this dynamic nature of communities of practice and the often conflictual relation of individuals to particular communities of practice which is central to my work and which significantly extends the concept of community of practice beyond its current usage.

Gender

In order to develop a model of gender which is adequate to the task of describing the complex negotiations which the gendered subject undertakes, in chapter 4 I fuse a model of performativity drawn

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from the work of Judith Butler (1993) with a model of gendered domains developed by Alice Freed (1996) and Bonnie McElhinny (1998): that is, a model of gender as an act, or as a verb, which is enacted within specific environments and contexts which are themselves gendered by association (Crawford, 1995). I bring these two theoretical positions together as it enables me to discuss the instability of the gendered identity constructed within language but also to analyse the way that gender is dispersed into contextual elements rather than being located at the level of the individual. This fusion enables me to describe gender at the level of discourse rather than only at an individual and utterance level, whereby settings, strategies, discursive moves are normatively gendered by communities of practice and negotiated, contested, affirmed, and, crucially, changed by community members. Thus, rather than the utopian vision of gender, sometimes suggested by the work of Butler (1990, 1993), as something which one can perform as one wishes, gender here is performed but within constraints established by communities of practice and our perceptions of what is appropriate within those communities of practice.² Furthermore, in order to analyse gendered practices, I shall analyse the way that one's sense of one's own and other's gender identity is already raced and classed and affected by other variables such as perceptions about education, age, sexual orientation, and the extent of mutual knowledge. I also question the assumption that women are powerless and that men are powerful, drawing on recent work which has questioned the way that power has been theorised (Thornborrow, 2002; Manke, 1997; Diamond, 1996). Thus, my aim is to question much of the research on gender and language and to formulate a new theoretical model of language production and interpretation and its relation to factors such as gender.

Politeness

Much research on linguistic politeness remains at the level of the utterance. As I argue in chapter 2, since Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) ground-breaking work on this subject, most theoretical work has remained caught up within their theoretical and analytical paradigms, and, whilst there have been some excursions into Relevance theory, little has been attempted which would make for a

pragmatic, context-based analysis of linguistic politeness and impoliteness. For example, many theorists simply assume that politeness is a set of behaviours which can be interpreted unequivocally: 'In everyday usage the term "politeness" describes behaviour which is somewhat formal and distancing, where the intention is not to intrude or impose... Being polite means expressing respect towards the person you are talking to and avoiding offending them... politeness [is] behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour' (Holmes, 1995: 5). Thus, Holmes assumes that it is possible to categorise unequivocally those utterances in which an individual speaker affiliates to others or distances her/himself from others through language. My argument is that, even for individual participants in a conversation, it might not be clear whether they or their interactants are being distant or showing concern in any simple way. Even where theorists are prepared to be slightly more flexible about their notion of what constitutes politeness or impoliteness, they nevertheless tend to assume that most people would normally consider an act to be clearly polite or impolite: thus, 'any utterance which could be interpreted as making a demand or intruding on another person's autonomy can be regarded as a potential face-threatening act. Even suggestions, advice and requests can be regarded as face-threatening acts, since they potentially impede the other person's freedom of action' (Holmes, 1995: 5). What I am trying to bring to the research on politeness is a questioning of the notion that most people would agree about what constitutes a polite or impolite act. Indeed, influenced by work on miscommunication and misunderstanding, it is my contention in chapter 3 that disagreement about politeness, and particularly about impoliteness, is one of the constituent and defining features of politeness (Coupland *et al.* (eds.), 1991; Grimshaw (ed.), 1990).

In a recent BBC radio programme about politeness, even though all of the participants interviewed stressed that they thought that politeness was very important, particularly in interactions between strangers, there were conflicting views about what constituted polite behaviour (BBC, Radio Wales, 2001). Such is the sense among certain members of the community that politeness is under threat or that there are changing forms of appropriate behaviour, that a group called the Polite Society, established in 1996, set up a Campaign for Courtesy and has designated a particular day each year as a

‘day of courtesy’ (Gregory, 2001a). Its founder member, the Revd Ian Gregory, states that he has ‘noted the steady decline in considerate behaviour at every level of life in the United Kingdom’ and suggests that there may be a link between this decline in courtesy and what he sees as a general decline in standards. He argues that ‘some of us are still appalled and angry at the amount of selfish and ignorant behaviour that bedevils a once great nation’ and he also claims that ‘millions yearn for better standards of inter-personal behaviour’ (Gregory, 2001a: 2). He characterises courtesy in three words ‘to LISTEN, to SMILE and take TIME in our dealings with each other’ (Gregory, 2001a: 2). Gregory argues that ‘We live in a world dominated by brilliant science and technology. And yet in terms of human behaviour and relationships we seem for much of the time to be Neanderthal’ (Gregory, 2001a: 3). This type of characterising of the perceptions of the current state of politeness as an indicator for an assumed current moral decline is taken up by many other social commentators in the media. Dalrymple argues in an article in *The Spectator* that the calling of patients in hospitals by their first names is a ‘sign of the ever-greater vulgarity and shallowness of British life’ (Dalrymple, in Gregory, 2001b: 2). Daley, in an article in *The Daily Telegraph*, argues that ‘there has been a fundamental change in the national view of civility: courtesy is now confused with deference. Over the last generation, the British have been taught to believe that politeness was just a bourgeois trick to keep social inferiors in their place. Is it too late now to say that equality does not amount to everyone learning to say “I can do anything I want”?’ (Daley, 2001: 3). In this type of thinking road-rage and air-rage have become emblematic of a shift from respect for community values to egocentrism and selfishness. In many of the newspaper articles and phone-ins which I surveyed there was a uniform feeling that politeness standards have declined. For example, in an article in *The Times*, Celia Brayford suggests that ‘life in Britain has become an unending struggle against negativity and nastiness. The courtesy for which the stereotyped English were once ridiculed has been transformed into habits of casual, everyday brutality which astonish our continental neighbours’ (Brayford, cited in Gregory, 2001c: 4). However, responses to Brayford’s article varied and many readers wrote in to state that they did not find that British people in general were any less polite than other nations, or than

British people were at other periods of history (Gregory, 2001c). It is this sense that politeness is an issue that people feel that they need to debate and perhaps defend will be reflected in this book, rather than assuming that politeness is a fixed and easily recognisable linguistic phenomenon.

Many theorists of politeness assume that they know what politeness is, and they make a clear distinction between ‘folklinguistic’ notions of politeness and linguistic politeness itself (Eelen, 2001). Watts *et al.* (1992) suggest that we should make a distinction between first-order politeness, that is ‘the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups’, that is common-sense notions of politeness; and second-order politeness, that is the ‘theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage’ (Watts *et al.*, 1992: 3). Eelen terms these ‘politeness1’ and ‘politeness2’, and sees one of the major theoretical problems in politeness theory to be the confusion between which one is being discussed in analyses; he suggests that politeness theorists ‘should avoid getting involved in the struggle over representations of reality, and instead incorporate these representations into reality by making struggle over them the object of research’ (Eelen, 2001: 46). I consider this distinction between folklinguistic/first-order politeness/politeness1 and theoretical linguistic definitions of politeness/second-order politeness/politeness2 to be less easy to maintain than Eelen, since politeness is always by its very nature a question of judgement and assessment. Thus, folklinguistic notions often colour the theorists’ categorisations of utterances. I would agree with Eelen that sometimes difficulties with analysis arise because theorists rely too much on their own personal assessment of whether an utterance is polite or not, whilst claiming that they are analysing objectively. In contrast, what I focus on throughout this book is the analysis of what people judge to be polite and this involves me both in discussing with individuals what they consider to be polite and also examining the way individuals relate to each other in conversations.

I argue, throughout this book, that it is not a simple matter to identify those utterances which are non-imposing or which show concern for others, either as a participant in conversation or as an analyst. Rather than simply analysing decontextualised utterances, I shall attempt to develop a pragmatics-based model of interaction

to account for the way that participants make sense of politeness and impoliteness, and the way that they vary their own production of politeness and impoliteness according to their assessment of the context and the particular community-of-practice norms. My principal contention is that politeness cannot be understood simply as a property of utterances, or even as a set of choices made solely by individuals, but rather as a set of practices or strategies which communities of practice develop, affirm, and contest, and which individuals within these communities engage with in order to come to an assessment of their own and others' behaviour and position within the group. Thus, this type of analysis is not simply concerned with the intention of individuals to be polite or impolite, nor is it simply prepared to add the perlocutionary effect of their talk on others to this paradigm, so that the hearer is included in a rather perfunctory way. Instead, I shall be arguing for a fundamental rethinking of the way that we analyse intentions and interpretations of linguistic acts – the relation between speakers and hearers.

As I mentioned earlier, I also draw attention to the fact that misunderstanding needs to be at the centre of our analytical model rather than the assumption being that there is perfect communication between interactants (Wodak, 1998; Coupland *et al.*, 1991; Grimshaw, 1990). In all interaction, individuals are working out their gendered identity and their position within a community of practice, as well as communicating with others, and politeness and impoliteness play a key role in presenting and producing a particular type of identity, and negotiating a position in the community of practice. Judging someone's utterance to be polite or impolite is also making an assessment of them as individuals. Deciding to be polite or impolite is a crucial part of constructing one's own sense of identity as 'nice', 'considerate', 'assertive', or 'tough', and assessing one's role in relation to other members of a group.

Within all communities of practice there is conflict over meaning and over the notion of what is appropriate. What is appropriate linguistic behaviour is implicitly a key notion in all research on linguistic politeness, but it is one which is rarely described or analysed adequately. Factors of gender, race, class, age, education, and knowledge play a major role in assumptions about the level of appropriate linguistic behaviour within particular communities of

practice. I analyse the norms of the particular community of practice at a higher level than simply the utterance, in terms of what forms of politeness/impoliteness are considered to be permitted to whom; what strategies may be adopted by participants and how they are judged by others; what contexts are implicitly or explicitly gendered in terms of what style of utterances or move is considered appropriate and for whom. I am not arguing that interactants always behave appropriately. In fact, it is precisely the contestation of these norms that people seem to be concerned with in everyday interaction. A concern with appropriateness and the way that people assess others' utterances involves analysing the way communities of practice perform and monitor politeness and impoliteness over long stretches of talk, describing the function of individual acts or interactions over an extended period of time, and the effects of particular acts over time. Thus, I am concerned to develop a form of analysis which can describe the assessments made by individuals of their talk in relation to community judgements of appropriacy (which they themselves have helped to form). Necessarily, therefore, the definition of politeness which I use in this book is not a simple one and is not concerned to try to prove that certain participants in a conversation are more or less polite than others; rather, I aim to develop a form of analysis which focuses on the judgement of both one's own speech and that of others in relation to notions of politeness and impoliteness and the functions which such judgements have within particular communities of practice.

Methodology and data

This book tries to analyse the intuitions that individuals have as speakers of a language who are trying to understand others, and work out their position in relation to other speakers, rather than trying to formulate a grand universalising theory which may have little to do with language as it is experienced in particular contexts. There seems to me to be a number of serious problems with data collection and interpretation in general, which I discuss more fully in chapter 1. Whilst I feel that it is essential to draw on 'real' data (audio-recorded conversations) in conjunction with other kinds of information about language, linguists need to be very wary of how data is analysed. When linguists interpret data, they often use the