



Linguistic (Im)politeness and Public Discourse in Media Sphere

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Abstract¹

The recent exponential growth and development in communication technology have allowed mass media to acquire pervasive effect influencing private and public sphere of our life. The line between formal and informal; socially appropriate and politely marked forms; civility and offensiveness; is getting blurred. The changing form of language in public discourse owes this phenomenon to the changing power structure in the new social order and surging quest for new identity. The structural changes in *network society* are markedly influencing the forms of language and their use. In this socio-political development, language forms and their use are overarching in capturing this change. Language cannot remain a monolithic tool in expressing these dynamic experiences. In order to understand changing language form and pattern, we need to engage in the ever-changing context as well. In this sense, media sphere becomes a dynamic source of data for any sociolinguistic inquiry. To illustrate the overarching scope of such a study, this paper examines theories in linguistic politeness in terms of the constructs developed in the pioneer works of Goffman (1971), Lakoff (1973, 1979), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Fraser and Nolen (1981), Leech (1983), and many other subsequent works in the field, in the context of the contemporary public discourse in media sphere in ever-emerging network society. The existing theories in Linguistic Politeness phenomenon are not able to capture this change and require to be extended to changing context, intervened by digital technology and computer mediated communication acts. The paper emphasizes the need for taking into account the structural changes in society at the advent of the process of digitization while understanding changes in language forms and their usages in the context.

1. Introduction

Speech acts in *public sphere* (Habermas, 1989) is appropriated by public scrutiny and social-cultural censorship. The recent exponential growth and development in communication technology have allowed mass media to acquire pervasive effect influencing private and public spheres of our life. This phenomenon is rapidly changing the form and content of language use

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in this digitized public space. The line between formal and informal; socially appropriate and (im)politely marked forms; civility and offensiveness; is getting blurred. The changing form of language in public space owes this phenomenon to the changing structure in the new social order and surging quest for asserting new identity by the mass. In this socio-political development, language forms and their use are overarching in capturing this change. The surge in ideologically loaded public discourses and directness of expressions reflect the changing nature of the public domain in ever expanding media sphere. Apart from the conventional media space, the computer mediated communication has created a new digital space beyond time and space. This sphere is mediated by individualized, at times anonymous contents being served to us for mass consumption. The structural changes in *network society* (Castells, 1997) are markedly influencing the forms of language and their use.

The language usages in the media sphere are marked with euphemism, hedging, taboo words, directness, ideologically loaded expressions, implicature, and fuzziness. 'Habermas (1979:186) argues that speakers and listeners regularly presuppose an ideal communicative exchange: discourse is rational and truthful, participants are 'free and equal' and decisions 'meet the unforced agreement of all those involved' (as quoted in Gastil, J. 1992: 473). However, 'Politics and discourse are inextricably intertwined. Political interaction requires language structures, and linguistic behavior necessarily involves structures of domination and legitimation.' (Gastil, J. 1992:469).

Such notions essentially assume interaction in a structured format that takes place in real space and time. However, the technological advancements in media and digitization of media sphere have made the identity and existence of communication partners virtual and fluid. In this sense, the scope of the theoretical assumptions needs to be extended to such communication events that have become a virtual reality. We need to engage sociolinguistic inquiry in a broader and accommodating way so that such changes in the contexts of language use may correspondingly account for changes in the language forms.

In order to understand changing language form and pattern, we need to engage in the ever-changing context as well. In this sense, media sphere becomes a dynamic source of data for any sociolinguistic inquiry. The paper emphasizes the need for taking into account the structural changes in society while understanding changes in language forms and their use in the context. To illustrate the overarching scope of such a study, this paper examines theories in linguistic politeness in the context of the contemporary public discourse in media sphere in ever-emerging network society. The context of language use has never been so dynamic and complex as is the case now. The society inherited from post-industrial revolution has been undergoing the process of digitization, opening local frontiers for global order. This process has ushered in technologically mediated contexts for language use.

Linguistic Politeness

Though most of the behaviors considered "polite" accompany language (Lakoff *et.al.*2005:2), the term "linguistic" is used here to underline centrality of language in such perceived polite behavior. Language is a powerful tool in alignment and realignment of people in the line of individual as well as collective identity. The common and widely perceived overlapping connotation between politeness and civility needs to be kept apart which is clearly identified and

distinguished by Papacharissi (2004):“...civility is misunderstood when reduced to interpersonal politeness, because this definition ignores the democratic merit of robust and heated discussion... however, it is not civility that limits the democratic potential of conversation, but rather, a confusion of politeness with civility.....The distinction drawn defines politeness as etiquette-related, and civility as respect for the collective traditions of democracy.” (Papacharissi, 2004: 260). The English Theophrastus(1702: 108)defines politeness as “Politeness may be defined as a dextrous management of our Words and Actions whereby men make other people have a better Opinion of us and themselves.” (extrapolated from Watts, 1992: 45).The work on politeness by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) remains the most influential work in giving a paradigm for the study of linguistic politeness (Watts et al. 1992:7). They (Brown and Levinson 1987:101-210) offer a framework of politeness distinguishing between “positive politeness” and “negative politeness”. One important postulate in their work is an assumption of Model Person (MP), who is a fluent speaker of a natural language, and can invoke rationality in the context of “face”. The theory proposed by them discusses 15 positive strategies and 10 negative strategies in polite behaviour which are listed as under:

Positive politeness

- i. Notice, attend to H(earer) (his interests, wants, needs, goods)
- ii. Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with H)
- iii. Intensify interest to H
- iv. Use in-group identity markers
- v. Seek agreement
- vi. Avoid disagreement
- vii. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground
- viii. Joke
- ix. Assert or presuppose S’s knowledge of and concern for H’s wants
- x. Offer, promise
- xi. Be optimistic
- xii. Include both S(peaker) and H(earer) in the activity
- xiii. Give (or ask for) reasons
- xiv. Assume or assert reciprocity
- xv. Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation).

(Brown & Levinson 1987:101-129)

Negative politeness

- i. Be conventionally indirect
- ii. Question, hedge
- iii. Be pessimistic
- iv. Minimize the imposition
- v. Give deference
- vi. Apologize
- vii. Impersonalize S and H
- viii. State the “Face-Threatening-Acts” (FTA) as a general rule
- ix. Nominalize
- x. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebted to H

(Brown & Levinson 1987:132-210)

Though the work by Brown and Levinson inspired many studies following their theory on politeness, their postulates remain a major point of criticism by consequent studies questioning their idea of a *Model Person*, *Positive/Negative* politeness, and the notion of *Face*.

Stemming out of *polis* (city) and attributed to the socio-cultural appropriateness of *civis* (citizen) of *civitas* (city), the concept of politeness is closely linked to linguistic behavior in the interpersonal communication. Politeness ‘derives from the fact that it lies at the junction between the study of certain forms of language usage such as address terms, honorifics, indirect speech acts, formulaic utterances, etc. and the study of processes of socialization and consequent social behaviour’ (Watts et al, 1992). Though we fall short of a universal definition of the concept of politeness, I restrict my discussion in the broader outlining of Fraser’s (1990) theoretical summarization of four distinct approaches in studying linguistic politeness that are:

a. Social-norm view,

This approach to politeness links politeness with speech style and assumes higher degree of formality in the style to greater degree of politeness. This approach assumes historical and cultural understanding of politeness as present in Western cultural standards.

b. Conversational-maxim view,

As an outcome of Grice’s Conversation Theory, this approach assumes ‘conversationalists are rational individuals who are, all other things being equal, primarily interested in the efficient conveying of messages’ (Fraser, *ibid*: 223). Grice (1989) posited strategies to minimize conflict and promote accord. Papacharissi (2004) observes that ‘while some of these strategies lead to smoother conversation, they also involve suppressing some of the discussants’ emotions and opinions’.

c. Face-saving view,

This approach is based on the Goffman’s (1971) idea of ‘face’ who defines ‘face’ as ‘the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact... an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes’ (Goffman *ibid*: 05). This idea of face was logically developed and arguable theorized by Brown and Levinson (1987) who distinguished between ‘*positive and negative face*’ where positive face refers to polite behaviour and the negative face suggests an act of rude behaviour.

d. Conversational-contract view

‘Fraser and Nolen (1981:96) suggest that politeness is the result of a conversational contract entered into by the participants in an effort to maintain socio-communicative verbal interaction conflict free’ (Watts 1992: 46). This view incorporates all the above three approaches but is quite different in the sense that each discussant entering a specific conversation brings an understanding of an initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least preliminarily, the expectations of all discussants (Fraser and Nolen, *ibid*). ‘These terms and conditions may be formal and imposed by social institutions or may have been informally determined in previous encounters, and thus may or may not be negotiable’ (Papacharissi *ibid*: 262).

The study of the politeness in the above four theoretical constructs is not very old and dates back to almost four decades of research and discussions in the discipline. The recent surge in explicit contents in public discourse and directness of expressions owe to the changing nature of the public domain. It is being mediated pervasive media that supplies individualized contents to us for mass consumption. The concept of linguistic politeness was shaped and developed in the pioneer works of Goffman (1971), Lakoff (1973, 1989), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Fraser and Nolen (1981), Leech (1983), Watts (1992), and many other subsequent works in the field. The referential remarks by Grice (1975) inspired study of linguistic politeness within the framework of Anglo-American pragmatics (Watts et al, 1992). Watts (1992), summarizes all the above four approaches towards understanding 'linguistic politeness' to achieve a linguistic universal effect. He looks at linguistic politeness as 'a marked extension or enhancement of 'politic behaviour', as a conscious choice of linguistic forms which, in accordance with the dictates of the time and fashion, are conventionally understood to be an attempt on the part of *ego* to enhance his/her standing with respect to *alter* .' He defines 'politic behaviour' as 'socio-culturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and /or maintaining in a state of equilibrium in the personal relationship between the individual of a social group, whether open or closed, during the ongoing process of interaction' (Watts, 1992: 50).

Let us turn to the other term used in the title i.e. Public Discourse, which essentially restricts the connotation in this context to that of the socialization process i.e. 'a particular way of talking about and understanding the world or an aspect of the world' (Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips 2002). *Public sphere* in this discussion essentially assumes any space outside the purview of *private sphere*. For a better understanding of the term private sphere, I will restrict myself to the remark of Thomas Burger that he makes in the Translator's Note in which the '*intimsphäre* denotes the core of a person's private sphere which is by law, tact, and convention is shielded from intrusion' (Habermas, *ibid*: xvi). Thus, instead of surveying *public sphere*, I have used this *intimsphäre* to contrast and denote the public domain, therefore, the space outside this sphere is the point of reference here. Also, viewing of such speech acts at pragmatic level outside this *intimsphäre* is termed in this paper as public discourse without getting into the etymological reference of the term.

The term media sphere used in this study refers to the pervasive space that media has acquired in the everyday activity of human life in private and public sphere. The rise of mass (new)-media in the *Network Society* (Castells, 1997) has facilitated supplying of individualized messages to be consumed by masses without any public scrutiny and social censorship. The structural changes in the new social order in the backdrop of the exponential growth in communication technology is very comprehensibly documented by Manuel Castells in his three monumental volumes known as *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. He defines network society as '...a society whose social structure is made of networks, powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technology. By social structure, I understand the organizational arrangements of humans in relations of production, consumption, reproduction, experience, and power expressed in meaningful communication coded by culture.'(Castells, 1997).

The quantum leap in the Information and Communication Technology has driven a fundamental restructuring of the post-industrial capitalist system which Castells (1997) calls 'information capitalism'. 'In the realm of communication, the network society is characterized by a pattern of

networking, flexibility, the recombination of codes, and ephemeral symbolic communication' (Castells, *ibid*: 30). Thus, the 'socialization of society- the construction of a shared cultural practice that allows individuals and social groups to live together (even in a conflictive togetherness)- takes place nowadays in the networked, digitized, interactive space of communication, centered around mass media and the Internet' (Castells, *ibid*). This shift in the structure has resulted in the major changes in cultural, social and political expressions originated, shaped and disseminated among empowered audiences in the media spaces formed by television, radio, print media, film, and web-networks. In this sense, the technology has acquired a pervasive effect, influencing the human life under the consistent *agenda-setting* by media. Thus, the media sphere is taken as the space outside the *intimsphäre* that is appropriated and mediated by continuous supply of information for mass consumption.

Discussion

'It is important to focus on the complex relation between individuals and society in the process of changes that take place in perceptions of what is acceptable or unacceptable linguistic practice at a social level. In order to do that, we need a more sophisticated model for language change' (Mills, S. 2009: 1055). The digitized media sphere has generated an assertive and politically charged environment for sharing, exchanging and expressing identities and their constructed meanings. The social and political radicalism, quest for collective identities and images, increasing degree of directness are triggering changes in the language forms in its becoming ideologically loaded. 'The anonymity of cyberspace makes it easier for individuals to be rude... Because the absence of face-to-face communication fosters discussion that is more heated, cyberspace actually promotes Lyotard's vision of democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy' (Papacharissi, 2004: 267).

In the network society where media has acquired pervasive effect and affecting all private and public sphere of our life, the rate of consumption of information and the domain of language use have also increased exponentially. The quantum and quantity of such use has created new forms, loud and loaded expressions, and a whole new set of jargon that encompasses multiple voices in the public sphere. The structural change in network society has considerably affected the social, cultural, and political institutions inherited from the post-industrial revolution. The uninterrupted supply of contents and mass consumption of information are attributing sociolinguistic changes at a high prolific rate that cannot be overlooked or undermined in the discipline. These structural changes become pertinent in the context of new social/cultural order which is essentially mediated by media and technology. The difference between virtual and real has blurred to the extent that 'collective mental experiences which are virtual, have become a fundamental dimension of everybody's reality'(Castells, *ibid*). The structured social/cultural engagement is being mediated and modified by pervasive media to the effect that the collective virtual experiences are being identified with by the people who may never meet in the real time and space.

Data²

a. 'Maut ke saudagar' may have hurt Congress

²The data for this study has been collected from various media sources in terms of the headlines published in different electronic and paper printed newspapers and postings on the web. Presenting the entire news was non-feasible looking at the scarcity of space. However the headlines carry sources from where the entire story can be retrieved from the links on the websites.

TNN Dec 24, 2007, 01.17am IST
[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2007-12-24/india/27993779_1_maut-bjp-sonia-gandhi]

b. Ramdev dubs Rahul as social media 'Pappu'

TNN Sep 15, 2013, 02.59AM IST
[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-09-15/indore/42080714_1_narendra-modi-prime-ministerial-candidate-awareness-programme]

c. Celebrate Narendra Modi's birthday as global 'Feku' day, says Congress

Tuesday, Sep 17, 2013, 22:43 IST | Place: Ahmedabad | Agency: PTI
[<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/1890307/report-celebrate-narendra-modi-s-birthday-as-global-feku-day-says-congress>]

d. Manmohan Singh Turns Aggressive, Spars With Arun Jaitley Over 'PM Chor Hai' Remark

[<http://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/manmohan-singh-turns-aggressive-spars-with-arun-jaitley-over-pm-chor-hai-remark-98353.html>]

e. Arvind Kejriwal attacks MPs, RJD to bring privilege notice

.....Team Anna member Arvind Kejriwal was at the centre of a controversy for calling MPs "rapists, murderers and looters", prompting angry criticism from political parties on Sunday with RJD saying it will bring a privilege notice against him in Parliament.....
PTI New Delhi/Patna, February 26, 2012 | UPDATED 23:06 IST
[<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rjd-to-bring-privilege-notice-arvind-kejriwal/1/175441.html>]

f. A rude awakening for Congress on social media power?

....Rahul Gandhi was literally left awestruck today when a Congress MP showed him hundreds of negative comments on social media on Sonia Gandhi's speech within hours of her address at the chintan shivir (brainstorming meeting).....
PTI Jan 19, 2013, 10.29PM IST.
[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-01-19/india/36431965_1_social-media-sonia-gandhi-congress-mp]

g. Friendships cut short on social media as people get ruder-survey

....Rudeness and throwing insults are cutting online friendships short with a survey on Wednesday showing people are getting ruder on social media and two in five users have ended contact after a virtual altercation.....
[<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/friendships-cut-short-on-social-media-as-people-get-rudersurvey/1100487/>]Reuters : London, Wed Apr 10 2013, 23:25 hrs

h. India students suspended for rude Facebook messages

[<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11500518>]8 October 2010Last updated at 11:10 GMT

i. Miss America Nina Davuluri: A rude awakening about racism

[http://www.mercurynews.com/bay-area-living/ci_24274110/miss-america-nina-davuluri-rude-awakening-about-racism]Oakland Tribune Teen Correspondent. Posted: 10/09/2013 03:00:00 PM PDT |

Let us consider some lexical choices in formal domains of contemporary Indian public/political discourse such as *maanavtaa kaa hatyaaraa* which literally translates as ‘murderer of humanity’; ‘*maut ka saudagar*’ as ‘trader of death’; *chor* contextually as ‘a crook’; *pappu* contextually as ‘an irrelevant and useless person’; *feku* contextually as ‘self boasting gossip monger’, *shehzada* as ‘a person of royal order perceived in this context with negative connotation’ etc., which are loud, loaded and loom large in the Indian public/political sphere. These expressions find voices in the prime time national news on mainstream electronic media and headlines of the prominent newspapers circulated countrywide. The list does not stop here and it entails a long trail of more loaded and emotionally charged contents in the social media space with reasoning for their validity and invalidity with equal intensity. The contents of reactive comments are abusive and found not to be quoted in this article. These expressions are referred to and by public faces that hold considerably high public offices. These are being used on the floor of the House, in the press briefings, and in formal discourses in Habermas’ (1962) *public sphere*. It is significant to note that such expressions combine notions such as Face Threatening Acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987), Implicature (Holly, 1989), and Political Metaphor (Endelman, 1977). The discussion on the issue entails a series of questions as to what extent such text carries any significance for any linguistic analysis. Can we understand such expressions in the premises of notions such as linguistic (im)politeness? Are such usages defining norm or denoting any change in the role and functions of language in formal domain? Can such texts be treated as isolated expressions or do they form any kind of discourse that perhaps is drawing heavily from corresponding change in the context? We cannot arrive at a straight answer to such speculations and that is what inspires this discussion. The process of digitization may have started as a technology revolution but gradually it has acquired the status of a social phenomenon that has transformed the process of socialization. Digital technologies have created a new environment which has transformed the conventional modes of communication. The available sizeable volume of research on the nature of such usage of language forms and patterns in this digitized media sphere have termed this phenomenon as Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

The scholarship in new media research, particularly in computer mediated communication (CMC) has concentrated around CMC, CMD, Flaming, Trolling, Politeness, Civility, and other related communication behavioural aspects. The studies in CMC focus primarily on the content of the available text in this form of communication and acknowledge two distinctly emerging trends of language use in this digital space which are flaming and trolling. Flaming refers to a form of hostile, aggressive communicative behaviour which has been widely explored in the studies such as Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Kayany, 1998; Lea et al., 1992; Lerner, 1996; Spears and Lea, 1992; and Walther et al., 1994. Whereas, trolling refers to an intentional act of luring of others into useless, circular discussion, without necessarily involving argument (Herring et al. 2002: 372 and Turner et al. 2005). Such online linguistic behavior has been widely explored in the studies such as Herring et al. (2002: 372) Turner et al. (2005), Donath (1999: 45) Utz (2005: 50), Tepper (1997: 41), Baker (2001), Cox (2006), and Brandel (2007: 32), Naraine (2007: 146), Donath (1999) and Dahlberg (2001) so on and so forth. Such studies hardly go beyond the premises of linguistic politeness. Such expressions in the media sphere have triggered a lot of researches and articulation about understanding the concept of impoliteness and inappropriateness in language usages in CMC. CMC is a fertile ground for studying impoliteness, whether it occurs in response to perceived threat (flaming), or as an end in its own right (trolling). Claire Hardaker (2010) (Im)politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Bousfield 2008; Culpeper 2008; Terkourafi 2008), in-civility (Lakoff 2005), rudeness (Beebe 1995,

Kienpointner 1997, 2008), and etiquette (Coulmas 1992), are subject to much discussion and debate, yet the CMC phenomenon of trolling is not adequately captured by any of these terms (Culpeper 2010 and others).

Whether it is *linguistic politeness* or the extension of *politic behaviour*, it certainly assumes a structured social interaction adopted and appropriated in a socio-cultural context which is shared by all members of the group. The models available in the discipline inherently assume communication partners interacting in the real time and space. The Brown and Levinson's (1987) idea of FTAs assumes impoliteness as an exception and is further consolidated by the Fraser and Nolen's (1981:96) idea of conversational-contract view. However, the new social order mediated by digitization restricts the contextual assumptions of conversation patterns and allows participants to ignore the requirements of maintaining *face* or entering into a *conversational contract* in the hyper-electronic virtual contexts. The very physical absence of the receiver/partner and no immediate threat to the *face*, allow the participants to break the rules of *conversational contract*. All the above four referential approaches, discussed in the first half of paper, to understand linguistic politeness fail to capture the interaction pattern and socialization of members of the open/closed groups in the media sphere. Coupland points out that sociolinguistic inquiry rarely discusses social change, 'though other perspectives on change and the specific interpretation of language change developed in variationist tradition are fundamental.' He further remarks that sociolinguistics precludes mass media from analysis of language change (Coupland, 2010:55). The present context of is language use in social context is mediated by hyper electronic texts and digital formats, which are altering the real context into a virtual reality. This change in language use requires to be captured in any such sociolinguistic inquiry. This papers just underlines that.

Conclusion

The study of language use, language change, language maintenance, and language shift in sociolinguistics keeps major thrust on language aspect and seldom or never on social changes. This selective approach hardly acknowledges factors behind such language changes and analyses data in terms of forms and patterns without looking closely at the social changes. The study of text can only be comprehensive and effective if we look at the context in its entirety. In this sense, media sphere becomes a dynamic source of data for any sociolinguistic inquiry. The existing sociolinguistic theoretical constructs need to be revisited in accommodating these structural changes in order to explain this trend in language use in media sphere and bring 'core linguistic inquiry' into the 'peripheral space' of such texts in use. If society is to be taken as context and language as text then any structural change in the context correspondingly affects the form and patterns of the text as well. It is proposed that in order to understand language form and pattern, we need to engage in the ever-changing context as well. Mediating media in communication patterns poses to be a significant factor in change of language forms and the contents. Thompson (1993) observes that 'media have created a new kind of public sphere which is despatialized and non-dialogical in character' (Thompson, 1993: 42). If we consider it to be true, then in this non-dialogical text, the meaning is more social than textual with many gaps which are being filled in by the viewer/reader. McQuail (2010) puts it straight in saying that 'we are consequently very dependent on the media for a large part of our wider symbolic environment, however much we may be able to shape our own personal version. It is the media which are likely to forge the elements which are held in common with others, since we now tend

to share much the same media sources and 'media culture'. Without some degree of shared perception of reality, whatever its origin, there cannot really be an organized social life' (McQuail, 2010: 83).

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