Testing Brown and Levinson’s theory in a corpus of spontaneous conversational data from Cypriot Greek

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Abstract

In Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory, every speech act is potentially face-threatening to an aspect of the hearer’s or the speaker’s face. Though imminent, face-threat is present in varying degrees, represented as the seriousness or weightiness (W) of FTA_x. Interlocutors calculate this using the formula \( W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x \), where \( D(S, H) \) represents the social distance between interlocutors, \( P(H, S) \) stands for the relative power of the hearer over the speaker, and \( R_x \) is the culturally and situationally specified ranking of the imposition entailed by FTA_x. Picking up from previous research, which has raised several objections regarding the validity of these predictions, this paper has two objectives. First, to test whether the proposed definitions of D, P and Rx are “operationalizable”: can a consistent way of assessing the values of these variables across situations be established for Cypriot Greek, such that interlocutors may plausibly appeal to these dimensions rather than to any others in making decisions about politeness? A second, related objective is to test the psychological plausibility of the theory: do interlocutors indeed engage in the amount of cognitive processing implied by postulating a level of assumptions about D, P and Rx which mediates between perception of the situation and politeness assessments? Tested against a corpus of spontaneous conversational data from Cypriot Greek, both assumptions appear problematic. Rather, directly linking perception of the situation to politeness assessments should be preferred on grounds of both parsimony and psychological plausibility.

1. Introduction

Brown and Levinson’s (1987 [1978]) politeness theory is based on two assumptions: that interlocutors are rational and that they are endowed with face, conceptualised as “(a) negative face: the basic claim to […] freedom of action and freedom from imposition (b) positive face: the
positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ claimed by interactants” (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 61). The face-threatening potential of an act (FTA) is represented as its weightiness (W). To calculate this, the social Distance between interlocutors, the Power of the addressee over the speaker, and the Ranking of an imposition are compounded using the formula \( W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x \) (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 76–77). D, P and R\(_x\) are assessed anew for each FTA\(_x\). Moreover, once combined in the \( W_x \) value of an FTA\(_x\), the particular values of D, P and R\(_x\) become untraceable, “mak[ing] the sources of the final assessment [of \( W_x \)] ambiguous” (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 81). As the weightiness of an FTA\(_x\) increases, interlocutors move upwards along a scale of increasing indirectness represented as a hierarchy of strategies (Figure 1). While these strategies and their ordering are claimed to be universal, the weightiness of a particular FTA, based on the values of D, P and R calculated for this act, will be culture-specific.

Brown and Levinson proposed these variables inspired, at least in part, by Brown and Gilman’s (1960) analysis of T/V address systems. Challenging the homogeneity of the latter’s findings, Braun draws attention to their restricted selection of informants (upper–middle-class males from urban areas), and to the “long and successful process of standardisation” (Braun 1988: 24) undergone by the languages analyzed. In this respect, Cypriot Greek with its nonstandard character, as well as the inclusion of speakers from both sexes and various socioeconomic backgrounds in the present study, provide an ideal ground for testing the universality of Brown and Levinson’s predictions. As a first approximation, our findings do justice to Braun’s claims: the proposed definitions of D, P and R, as well as the formula combining their values in one numerical estimate of the weightiness of an FTA\(_x\), fail to account for politeness realizations in the Cypriot Greek data. Instead, allowing extralinguistic features of the

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**Figure 1. Strategies for performing FTAs (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 60)**

Positive politeness

- 1. without redressive action, boldly
- 2. positive politeness
- 3. negative politeness

Greater

Elimination of risk of face loss

Lesser

Do the FTA

1. without redressive action, boldly

4. off record

5. Don’t do the FTA

2. positive politeness

3. negative politeness

on record

4. off record

5. Don’t do the FTA
situation to enter directly into interlocutors’ assessments of politeness yields the correct predictions.

Previous research has raised several objections regarding the validity of Brown and Levinson’s predictions. The monodirectional impact of D on degree of indirectness has been challenged by findings that similar patterns may be observed between intimates and strangers, while more effort is invested with acquaintances (Wolfson 1989). The assumed independence of D and P is similarly not empirically supported (Holtgraves and Yang 1990: 725; Watts et al. 1992: 9; Tannen and Kakava 1992: 13). Furthermore, factors determining politeness assessments may not reduce without residue to values of D, P and R. Familiarity and affect (Slugoski and Turnbull 1988), the interlocutors’ sex (Holmes 1988; Ide 1982), the presence of third parties (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 34; Clark 1996: 15) and the extent to which the situation calling for face-work is standard (Vollmer and Olshtain 1989) have been shown to interact with the proposed variables in determining the choice of strategy.

This article tests whether D, P and $R_x$ as currently defined account for the distribution of politeness strategies in a corpus of spontaneous conversational Cypriot Greek data. Not only does it emerge that D, P and $R_x$ must be construed differently on different occasions if the proposed association of degree of indirectness with the sum of D, P and $R_x$ is to be upheld, it also turns out that appealing to perceptually assessed extralinguistic features instead yields more accurate predictions as to the politeness strategy selected. Such direct association between extralinguistic features of the situation and politeness strategy selected militates against postulating a level of assumptions about D, P and $R_x$, which is intermediate between perception of the situation and choice of strategy, and to which extralinguistic features merely serve as input. If politeness indeed “most often passes unnoticed” (Kasper 1990: 193), that is, is somehow unmarked, then a theory which implies less rather than more cognitive effort for interlocutors, by, for example, linking extralinguistic features of the situation directly with politeness assessments, should be preferred.

2. Data collection and analysis

This study is based on spontaneous exchanges between adult native Greek Cypriot speakers recorded in the four major urban centers of the island and in a variety of settings. Using as a criterion whether the act offered or requested was desirable to the speaker or to the addressee (Sperber and Wilson 1995 [1986]: 250–251), utterance-sequences realizing offers or requests were identified and transcribed.1 2,189 realizations of
offers and requests were subsequently analyzed for a number of variables, linguistic and extralinguistic.

Among the linguistic devices available in Modern Greek for performing offers and requests (Sifianou 1992), the present analysis considers: the presence/absence of a main-clause verb predicating an act $A$ of the speaker or of the addressee, the type of main-clause verb, the subjective modality expressed by it, the combination of number+person for which it is marked, and additional markers of politeness (address terms, diminutives etc.). While each of these is, in principle, relatable to one or more strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 91–227; Figure 1), such a move relies on the assumption that combinations of these devices are somehow equivalent and can be used interchangeably. Aiming precisely to test this assumption, this study refrains from taking this step.

To test the authors’ claim that the degree of indirectness of an utterance realising an FTA is commensurate with the sum of the values that the speaker assigns to $D$, $P$ and $R_x$, a consistent way of assessing these values, that is, one which is not (wholly) idiosyncratic, is required. Abandoning this requirement not only renders the theory unfalsifiable but also makes it hard to explain how interlocutors may agree on their assessment of the FTA-specific values of $D$, $P$ and $R_x$ (hence perceive each other to be polite), if not wholly by coincidence. This article relies on the fundamental assumption that the situation-specific values of $D$, $P$ and $R_x$ may be assessed drawing on extralinguistic features of the situation such as the interlocutors’ sex, age, and social class, the relationship between them, the setting of the exchange and whether the speech act performed occurs for the first time or is repeated.

3. Main findings

3.1. *The combined effect of the three sociological variables on degree of indirectness*

If we estimate the values of $D$, $P$ and $R_x$ on particular occasions of use, we find that the degree of indirectness of the utterances involved does not increase analogously to the values of these variables. The most straightforward hypothesis in this respect is that requests and offers exchanged between speakers of the same sex, age and social class (low $D$) who occupy similar positions in the professional hierarchy (low $P$) should be more direct than those exchanged between speakers of different ages and sexes (high $D$, withholding assumptions about the power relations between different age-groups and sexes) occupying different positions in the professional hierarchy (high $P$). In requests performed for the first time by
middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, addressing middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are long-standing colleagues at work (low $D+P$), directness, in the guise of AV-imperative-2sg., is preferred (24 out of 56 utterances, i.e., 42.85%). This preference persists in requests performed for the first time by middle-class women, aged 18–30, addressing middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are their employers at work, a situation of high $D$ and high $P$ (3/8 utterances, i.e., 37.5%).

Offers show a similar picture. When offering a thing/action for the first time, middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, addressing middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are long-standing colleagues at work, prefer ἔθελο, ‘to want’-indicative with rising intonation-2sg. (4/20 utterances, i.e., 20%), and so do middle-class women, aged 18 to 30, addressing middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are their employers at work (3/5 utterances, i.e., 60%). In both offers and requests, that is, speakers’ preferences regarding the degree of indirectness of the main-clause verb of their utterances remain unaffected by different combinations of the values of the extralinguistic variables, which, according to the definitions of $D$ and $P$, should prompt an increase in the context-specific values of these variables.

A similar degree of indirectness is also opted for as regards additional markers of politeness. These include: (a) diminution (derivational via suffixation, or periphrastic); (b) embedded conditional clauses questioning the addressee’s desires; (c) embedded clauses or prepositional phrases expressing purpose or reason. 20 out of 76 utterances (26.31%) exchanged between middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are old colleagues at work (low $D+P$), and 3 out of 14 utterances (21.42%) by middle-class women, aged 18 to 30, to middle-class men, aged 31 to 50, who are their employers at work (high $D+P$), make use of one of these mitigation mechanisms. The proximity of these ratios suggests that, contrary to prediction, an increase in the values of $D+P$ is not accompanied by an increase in the overall degree of indirectness of the observed utterances. What is more, there is no qualitative difference in the mitigating mechanisms preferred: giving reasons for one’s utterance (possibility [c]) prevails in situations of both low and high $D+P$.

In the above instances, interlocutors exchange a greater number of requests and offers when $D$ and $P$ are low (76 between 21 pairs; average 3.62/pair) than when they are high (14 between 6 pairs; average 2.34/pair). This finding may be explained by appealing to Brown and Levinson’s fifth super-strategy, ‘Don’t do the FTA’. While increased $D$ and $P$ values may well result in nonrealization of the FTA, this cannot be empirically verified. In addition, one would then have to explain why an increase in the values of $D$ and $P$ causes a polarization of speakers’ choices around the two extremes of the proposed hierarchy of strategies (Figure
1), rather than a shift toward higher-numbered strategies. Drawing on the notion of Conversational Contract (Fraser and Nolen 1981; Fraser 1990), I would propose instead that it is part of the terms of the conversational contract (the negotiated rights and obligations of interlocutors) that employees conform to the wishes of their employers rather than express their own. No such restriction applies between equals on the professional hierarchy. Thus, both the lesser number of offers and requests addressed by employees to employers and their direct performance are accounted for: offers and requests falling within the terms of the conversational contract have been prenegotiated, so to speak, requiring no further explicit negotiation each time.

3.2. Metaphorical Power?

The mostly asymmetrical distribution of FN +mu ‘my’ and title+FN in the data calls for explanation under the variable of Power. FN+mu is used asymmetrically by 24 out of 30 pairs of interlocutors: typically older women addressing younger addressees; recipients reply with FN or a kinship term, such as má:m:a ‘mum’. As a common address term used by mothers to children, FN+mu could then be associated with the addressee’s low P over the speaker, explaining why a male employer can use it to address a female employee:

(1) lípón cítakse, káne tilefonima esí marúla mu
    ‘OK look, you make the call, Marula dear.’

However, more than half of the instances of asymmetrical FN+mu usage occur between friends, acquaintances, or old colleagues. To account for these in terms of P, this must now be construed metaphorically. Power based on age no longer emanates from (material or metaphysical) control over one’s interlocutor and cannot be captured under its current definition (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 77). Instances when the addressee’s “real” (as opposed to metaphorical) power over the speaker is not low, yet FN+mu is used, make this point rather dramatically.

(2) ea né opiódipote enòiazmó òélo, e ján:a mu?
    ‘If you have any questions, Yana dear?’

The addressee in example (2) is a customer entering the shop for the first time. The salesperson’s repeated offers (of services and advice) indicate her desire to see the client return. The addressee, then, has at least some power over the speaker. But by using FN+mu asymmetrically, the speaker is instead asserting power over the addressee. This time, P does not emanate from the speaker’s relationship to the addressee; in fact, it runs contrary to it. The speaker can claim power over the addressee only meta-
phorically: by behaving the way a mother would toward a child, she conveys her desire to treat the addressee well.

Title+FN is used asymmetrically by 12 out of 24 pairs of interlocutors. This usage consists of one party giving title+FN and receiving, variably, FN, LN (without title, a usage nowadays confined to the army and the classroom) or mána μu, literally ‘my mother’, an endearing form of address. Older age in a work setting turns out to be the guiding principle in asymmetrical title+FN usage. However, age can only metaphorically be construed as a source of P. Power based (solely) on age is, so to speak, “nominal”: it cannot be enforced in the direct way that Brown and Levinson’s definition implies.

By extension, title+FN comes to encode appreciation/respect: enhancing his/her own positive face by appearing to be a competent member of society is the speaker’s primary concern in this case. Expressing appreciation/respect can, then, override considerations of social class or relationship, even when these would normally tip the balance of power in favor of the speaker. This is clear in example (3), where a younger working-class female salesperson receives title+FN by an older, middle-class long-standing customer.

(3) έλα είρια (.) έλα είρια ελένι, διστιξός ενά
‘Come Mrs (.) come Mrs Eleni. Unfortunately {only} one {juice}’

A metaphorical construal of P leaves us with a notion that is hardly constrained: it can be in conflict with concrete sources of power and may even override them (as in examples [2] and [3]). How is a speaker to decide which to attend to, real or metaphorical P, if we extend its definition in this way? Rather, asymmetrical FN+μu and title+FN usage appear to be directly tied to extralinguistic features of the situation. Strategic exploitations of these are then possible (examples [1] to [4]). Indeed, it is by deviating from established usage that such examples achieve the particular effects each time sought by speakers.

3.3. *Isolated FTAs?*

The following marked usage of title+FN occurred at home:

(4) κάτσε είριε νίκο, θέλεις να μας κάνεις τα νέσκαφε εσί υ πι κσέρης i μας τa κάνει fανίτσα?
‘Have a seat Mr Nikos. Do you want to make us some coffee since it is your speciality or shall Fani make them?’

The recipient of title+FN in example (4) is a younger member of the speaker’s family and the setting is at home. Example (4) cannot be explained as a momentary shift to a more ‘formal’ address term, resulting
from an increase in $R_x$ (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 18). It accompanies an offer to the addressee to sit down, which he was about to do anyway. Even the ensuing request to prepare coffee (to which the offer may be said to function as a prelude) does not constitute an imposition of high $R$. To see what prompted this marked use of title+FN, which is unique in the data and was perceived as marked in context, Goffman’s notion of interactional imbalance is relevant:

When the participants in an undertaking or encounter fail to prevent the occurrence of an event that is expressively incompatible with the judgments of social worth that are being maintained, and when the event is of the kind that is difficult to overlook […] one or more participants find themselves in an established state of ritual disequilibrium or disgrace, and an attempt must be made to re-establish a satisfactory ritual state for them. (Goffman 1967: 19)

Based on this notion, Bayraktaroglu (1992: 15) proposes the notion of Face Boosting Acts (FBAs), acts which satisfy rather than threaten the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker. The father’s addressing his son with title+FN in example (4) may be construed as such an FBA. Face loss has occurred for the son in closely preceding discourse through another participant’s noticing his physical disability. Arguably, the father’s marked use of title+FN attempts to correct this prior loss of face by boosting his son’s face, addressing him as an older person worthy of respect.

By exemplifying how a “negative” politeness strategy can be used to redress positive face needs, example (4) highlights the fact that attempts to associate particular politeness substrategies with specific face-wants are poorly motivated. Moreover, if the choice of a more ‘formal’ address term in example (4) is indeed motivated by an increase in $R_x$, this $R_x$ does not narrowly correspond to the FTA$_x$ in which the address term occurs. Rather, it follows from an interactional imbalance caused by another speaker in prior discourse. That is, the seriousness of the FTA$_x$ is not in this case compounded of the risk which $x$ engenders for the addressee’s positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 78), but of the threat to the addressee’s positive face left unmitigated by another participant in $x-1$. This possibility is not captured under the authors’ notion of context-dependence of the three sociological variables, since judging from their examples, what they have in mind is dependence on extra-linguistic context, rather than on the immediately preceding linguistic context. Example (4) thus accords with previous findings that face is negotiated over conversational turns (Bayraktaroglu 1992; Lerner 1996), calling into question the claim that in calculating D, P and R$_x$ the speaker always starts with a clean slate (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 76).
3.4. Problems with ranking

In example (5), the husband reminds his wife that the conversation is being recorded, after she has been referring to business matters with names and facts.

(5) kataγráfi ta túto re aynúla
    ‘Hey Angie, this is recording it.’

D and P on this occasion are low: the conversation is taking place at home amongst family members and the researcher, who is a family friend. This leaves $R_x$ to account for the choice of the off-record strategy. But if $R_x$ is high, how is the use of the endearing address term (Angie) to be explained? This is not the established form of the addressee’s name. Rather, it constitutes a momentary shift to a more intimate address form than usual. Contrary to Brown and Levinson’s claim that “[w]hat we did not expect, and have not found, is that there might be a shift to more ‘intimate’ address forms with an increase in $R$” (1987 [1978]: 18; original emphasis), example (5) displays the possibility of such a shift.

One possible explanation for the husband’s choice of address term in example (5) is to enhance the chances of his wife’s compliance with his remark. Cypriot Greek derivational diminutives have strong connotations of affection, which makes them appropriate for use with only a restricted range of addressees (Terkourafi 1999: 114–115). By asserting such intimacy with his wife, the speaker attempts to present his remark as a piece of advice rather than a reprimand. His choice of address term could have hardly been more appropriate: it is because $R_x$ is high that a reassertion of this intimacy is needed. This explanation diverges from the view that “if shifts [in address term usage] are permissible at all, we should merely expect a shift towards a more ‘formal’ address form than normally used […] when R-values increase between the same interlocutors” (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 18).

Arguably, example (5) represents a mixture of strategies. This can result in either a hybrid strategy (something between positive and negative politeness) or a continuous approaching and distancing of interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 230–231). However, example (5) instantiates a third possibility: a combination of the off-record strategy with positive politeness as a way of concurrently attending to both aspects of the addressee's face. The fact that the speaker preferred this combination over using the off-record strategy on its own is evidence that expressing respect for the addressee’s freedom of action and concurrently asserting familiarity with the addressee achieves redress more efficiently in situations of high W than any of these strategies used in isolation. It thus
suggests that the two aspects of face can be equally important, so that none can be ignored without a loss in efficiency. Such evidence argues against according priority to the negative aspect of face over its positive counterpart (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 73–74) and supports the stance that, if such a decision is possible at all, it cannot be taken independently of cultural and situational factors (Matsumoto 1988; Held 1989; Bayraktaroğlu 1992; Mao 1994; Terkourafi forthcoming).

3.5. *Problems with scalability*

The most commonly encountered address terms in the data are FN+mu, FN, title+FN, and title+LN. Intuitively, this order corresponds to a scale of increasing formality/decreasing familiarity. Nevertheless, on morphological criteria, FN+mu is more indirect than FN. Familiarity may then prompt increased indirectness in much the same way as formality. This is nicely captured in Brown and Levinson’s positive politeness strategy, which is more indirect than bald-on-record usage. The problem is that direct usage (FN) is applicable to situations of higher D+P than positive politeness (FN+mu), for example, by employees addressing employers. The association of increasing W with increasing indirectness can no longer be defended in such cases.

Attempts to rank the above set of address terms along one continuous scale of increasing indirectness are faced with the additional problem that discontinuities occur in the application of the scale in different settings. Address terms used at work range from FN+mu through FN to title+FN, and occasionally title+LN. However, title+FN does not feature amongst address terms used on radio/TV and in formal discussions. The possibilities now range from FN+mu through FN to title+LN. Older addressees are consistently addressed with title+LN (and V, example [6]), while younger addressees receive FN (and T, example [7]). Example (8) provides further evidence of the restriction against use of *title+FN in formal settings: this never seems to constitute an option, even when doubt exists as to the appropriate address term:

(6) eh círie marúxo na sas dóso esás to lýyon (.)
   ‘Er, Mr Maruxos, can I bring YOU in now?’

(7) ce andréa vévea na rotísume (.) e-i zoi su metá ta dékatésera (.) éçi al:ákxi?
   ‘And Andrea of course let us ask. Has your life changed after the age of fourteen?’

(8) o níkos o círios thérlas théli na pi káti
   ‘Nikos, Mr Terlas would like to say something.’
This qualitative difference cannot be captured with reference to D, P and R: if the type of setting produced an increase in the values of these variables, a wholesale shift toward more formal address should occur in formal settings. However, intimate address by FN+mu is still appropriate in some cases in these settings, and so is FN, while title+FN is excluded. If, on the other hand, title+FN and title+LN are viewed as different realizations of the same strategy, one must recognize that they are not interchangeable. But, whereas the strategy used is determined by $W_x$ (the sum of D, P and R), the theory contains no indication as to how to choose between different realizations of the same strategy. The exclusion of title+FN from formal settings suggests that its use is constrained directly by the type of setting, rather than — or in addition to — $W_x$. Its distribution in the Cypriot Greek data can then be more adequately described with reference to extralinguistic features of the situation: the type of setting (at work) and the addressee’s older age relative to the speaker. Allowing extralinguistic features of the situation to enter directly into decisions regarding the applicable set of expressions enables us to reflect qualitative differences between expressions not captured solely with reference to D, P and R.

3.6. Two ‘‘modes’’ of indirectness

If we compare the range of combinations of type of verb-modality-number+person used at home to perform requests and offers to the overall range of additional markers of politeness used at home, we find a concentration on a few combinations of verb forms, accompanied by a wide range of additional markers of politeness. Utterances recorded at work replicate this pattern. This division of labor between (limited) modification in the main clause verb and (extensive) modification via additional elements is inverted on radio/TV and in formal discussions. Speakers now draw on a wide range of combinations of type of verb-modality-number+person, while using additional markers of politeness a lot more sparsely.

Several conclusions may be drawn from this comparison. First, exchanges at home and at work show extensive similarities. The set of expressions that interlocutors draw on at home is a proper subset of the set of expressions on which they draw at work. As a thirty-year-old man put it, when asked how he would address his superior at work (in the fire brigade), δεν εξυμεν ας τετ’’α ‘‘we don’t have such things’’ (referring to the power differential between superiors and inferiors in the professional
hierarchy). While his remark is probably inaccurate as it stands (witness the small number of requests/offers addressed by employees to employers discussed in 3.1 above), it is revealing of native speakers’ perception of verbal interaction at work: explicit verbal negotiation at work is highly reminiscent of the informal style found at home.

Second, considerations of standardization must be brought into the picture. A number of additional markers of politeness observed are either variants of standard ones (e.g., re for standard vre, ‘hey’; ate for standard ade, an exhortative particle; kori for standard kopeljá, ‘girl, lass’; and diminutive suffixes -u(ð)in, -u(ð)a for standard -aci, -ula, -itsa) or occur only marginally in standard Modern Greek (e.g., mana mu ‘my mother’). They are therefore excluded from use on radio/TV and at formal discussions, which favor standardizing tendencies, much like discussions with mainland Greeks do.11 The sharp divide between modification of main-clause verb forms and modification by additional markers of politeness partly reveals the anatomy of two different registers: a non-standardizing one (at home and at work) and a standardizing one (on radio/TV/at formal discussions). However, if politeness is defined as adequacy or appropriateness of verbal expression in relation to extra-linguistic context (Braun 1988: 49; Escandell-Vidal 1998: 46; Terkourafi forthcoming), interlocutors’ concern for politeness cannot be irrelevant to the selection of an appropriate register for the conversation. An inappropriate selection of register can indeed be interpreted as impolite.12 In other words, choice of register (standardizing vs. nonstandardizing) has an impact on politeness assessments in Cypriot Greek, and as such falls within the scope of any study of politeness in Cypriot Greek.

To account for the existence of these two registers within Brown and Levinson’s theory would require some way of comparing, on the one hand, the overall indirectness of an utterance using relatively direct main-clause verb forms and one or more additional markers of politeness to, on the other hand, the overall indirectness of an utterance using more elaborate main-clause verb forms (with the act offered/requested often relegated to an embedded clause) but no additional markers of politeness. The task seems impossible. However, speakers do not draw on the two resources (modifying the main clause verb vs. using additional markers of politeness) in parallel. Rather, they draw on one instead of the other. Significantly, as note 13 attests, it is not up to the speaker to choose which resource to draw on each time. Extralinguistic features of the situation guide a choice between what we may call two different ‘modes’ of being indirect in the data collected. Conflating these two modes on a unidimensional scale of indirectness blurs a qualitative distinction that is essential to politeness considerations in Cypriot Greek.
3.7. Transparent sources of $W_x$ assessment

Brown and Levinson claim that “in compounding the variables into a single index, $[W_x = D(S, H) + P(H, S) + R_x]$ makes the sources of the final assessment ambiguous” (1987: 81). The summative basis of the formula implies that, so long as the ‘right’ amount of indirectness is invested, the polite import of an utterance is ensured. This claim appears problematic in the light of examples suggesting that, even in the same sociocultural context, certain polite forms may be more attached to the implications of one variable rather than another.

Discussing asymmetrical uses of \( FN+mu \) in 3.2 above, I concluded that an appeal to the speaker’s sex (female) and/or age (older than the addressee) yields more accurate predictions than an appeal to \( P \) as defined by Brown and Levinson. Similarly, asymmetrical uses of title+FN are more adequately accounted for in terms of the addressee’s age (older than the speaker) and the setting of the exchange (at work). This is not to say that all asymmetrical uses of \( FN+mu \) and title+FN will actually exhibit these extralinguistic features. However, they all aim at invoking the emotive connotations of relationships characterized by these extralinguistic features. In this sense, rather than being ambiguous as to the sources that prompted the speaker’s choice of address, asymmetric occurrences of these address terms make such sources transparent. The speaker’s asymmetric use of these address terms would be infelicitous if there were any ambiguity as to the particular combination of extralinguistic features that he or she is trying to invoke and with which the expression of certain feelings is associated.

Similarly, if the setting of the exchange constrains the applicable set of address terms as argued in 3.5 above, the speaker’s choice of address term will have the effect of revealing something of the source of his/her final assessment. In formal settings, title+LN is the standard way of addressing older addressees; in work settings, the same addressees are most likely to receive title+FN. Finally, the speaker’s choice to be indirect by (primarily) modifying the main clause verb of his/her utterance, or using additional markers of politeness, can also reduce ambiguities as to the source of his/her final assessment. To the extent that these two resources are drawn upon differentially in Cypriot Greek (see 3.6), opting for one rather than the other reveals something of the reasons that prompted the speaker’s choice of expression.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of a corpus of spontaneous offers and requests from Cypriot Greek suggests that extralinguistic features of a situation do not reduce
without residue to $D$, $P$ and $R_x$ values. These variables calculated for individual acts are not adequate, as currently defined, to account for speakers’ choices of address terms, whether these concern established forms of address or strategic exploitations of these. Moreover, they do not seem to have any psychological validity in guiding interlocutors’ assessments of politeness.\textsuperscript{13} Finally, evidence that speakers do not use expressions which are “equally” indirect under the proposed hierarchy (Figure 1) interchangeably suggests that the choice between these expressions is significant for politeness assessments. In the above cases, a direct appeal to extralinguistic features of the situation yields the correct predictions. What speakers seem to have internalized in this case is not a principle such as the formula proposed by Brown and Levinson, but knowledge of what expressions to use in what situations. A psychologically plausible approach to politeness may be proposed along these lines.\textsuperscript{14}

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Notes

1. Transcription conventions:
   - $FN$ = first name; $LN$ = last name; $T$/lowercase = 2nd person singular of pronouns/verbs; $V$/uppercase = 2nd person plural of pronouns/verbs; $\text{dim.} = \text{diminutive}$; $(.) = \text{brief pause}; \text{comma} = \text{flat intonation}; \text{full stop} = \text{falling intonation}; \text{question-mark} = \text{rising intonation}; \{} \{} = \text{material inserted to make translation more comprehensible. Items discussed in the text are underlined in the examples.}$

2. Full explication of these variables is provided in Terkourafi (forthcoming).

3. The classification of main-clause verbs reflects both grammatical and lexical considerations affecting degree of indirectness. “Action verb” (AV) refers to main-clause verbs whose propositional content expresses the act to be performed, when this act is not verbal (e.g., $\text{dio}$ ‘to give’, $\text{pino}$ ‘to drink’). “Speech act verb” (SAV) refers to verbs whose propositional content expresses the act to be performed when this act is verbal (e.g., $\text{sxoliako}$ ‘to comment’, $\text{apando}$ ‘to answer’). Offers or requests performed using the verb $\text{kelo}$ ‘to want’ (Sifianou 1992: 142, 144, 150) focus attention on the attitude of the main-clause subject toward the act specified in the subordinate clause, as opposed to offers and requests performed by means of the act-designating verb alone (i.e., when the main-clause verb is an AV or SAV), which focus attention on the act to be performed. Reported preferences are relative, not absolute. That is, they concern the construction that was more frequent when separately compared with each other construction used in the situation at hand.

4. It is unlikely that the direct realizations observed are the result of the combined effect of $D + P$ being offset by $R_x$. First, realizations of greater directness than those observed should be available for use in situations where all three variables are low. However, the preferences noted concern the most direct realizations from the range of formal possibilities in Cypriot Greek. Second, conversational topics largely concerned mundane issues. As a result, $R_x$ remains generally low throughout the data (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 51).
5. Recipients of title+FN were above 50 in 16/24 pairs, and between 31 and 50 in a further seven pairs. This suggests an absolute “age-threshold” of around forty-five for addressing someone by title+FN. While necessitating information about the exact age of informants, which was not available, this hypothesis points even more strongly to age rather than Power as the determining factor in asymmetrical title+FN usage.


7. Asymmetrical uses of FN+mu and title+FN in the data cannot be attributed to re-ranking P (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 228–232). In re-ranking variable values, speakers engage in strategic language use, whereas FN+mu and title+FN are typically used in Cypriot Greek by older women to younger addressees, and by younger speakers to older addressees in a work setting respectively.

8. Revising their original stance, Brown and Levinson allow address forms to be directly tied to the social relationship between interlocutors (1987: 18).


10. The absence of title+FN from formal settings in Cypriot Greek cannot be attributed to standardizing tendencies, since this is a common address term in standard Modern Greek also (Bakakou-Orfanou 1989: 170–171).

11. The comparability of the two situations is supported by switches between T and V (Terkourafi 2001) and between standard Modern Greek and Cypriot Greek diminutive suffixes in successive turns of the same speaker (Terkourafi forthcoming).

12. A telling example of this occurred when the researcher was reprimanded by a family member for addressing another family member older than herself using V, abiding by an established usage in Mainland Greek.

13. That Brown and Levinson intended their theory as a psychologically plausible account of politeness assessments made in the course of actual conversations by speakers of a language, rather than merely as a theoretical post facto explanation of the observed facts, is demonstrated by their discussion of the formula yielding W, as “at least a partially accurate representation of cognitive process” (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 81). Moreover, they attribute specific assumptions to the speaker regarding the values of D, P and R (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 74–75), and model the speaker’s choice of expression as a decision-making process along the lines of a specific mode of reasoning about means and ends (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 64–65).

14. This task is taken up in Terkourafi (forthcoming).

References


