Politeness: Adolescents in Disagreements

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Abstract—**Politeness is deemed vital in ensuring communication diplomacy. In unfolding adolescents' oral strategies in handling disagreement, three variables-social distance, formality of issue and power differences were comparatively analyzed between L1 and L2. Conveniently selected adolescents were asked to complete discourses. Although medium used may not show significant differences, these variables may suggest influences in how adolescents handle spoken disagreements.**

Index Terms— **Adolescents, disagreement politeness, social distance, formality of issue, power difference.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Challenges in abiding to discourse structures may also be accompanied with hurdles to adhere to culturally expected politeness. Politeness is an essential communicative tool as it "shows consideration for the face needs of one's addressee" ([1], p. 81). Tactful encoders may wisely choose lexis or expressions, which may be consciously taught and trained, to adhere to social politeness expectation in order to achieve peaceful encounters with others [2]. Although many may attempt to satisfy such social demands, only age/experience, skills and knowledge orientation [3] may enable some to receive deference or respect. These aspects are essential in socio-linguistics so that communicative diplomacy would not be breached [4]. As they are "an enormously complex kind of reflexive reasoning" ([5], p. 12), necessity to research reasoning as "the roots in interpersonal ritual which may be fundamental in an evolutionary sense to social life and human intelligence" ([5], p. 15) is vital. Nevertheless, language used may not be the barrier for politeness [2]. In a communicative context, Grice's Cooperative Principle [6] and Leech's Politeness Principle [1] strongly believe generosity, modesty and sympathy are also essential. Grice [6] submitted politeness as reflective and reasoning acts and Leech [1] later surmounted polite illocutions on cost-benefits, options and indirectness. From a cultural perspective, Brown and Levinson based their Face Theory [7] on "wants" where survival to territorial or public self-image is upheld unless threatened where face saving act is then applied.

Aggression can exist not only within ethnicity, in internal social control but also in external competitive relations with others [8]. The act of tackling dissatisfactory remarks without offending or jeopardizing affiliation [2] can be labeled as negative politeness. While tussling in disagreements, "a reactive, requiring a prior utterance from an interlocutor" ([9],

p. 364), hedges is adopted to minimize effects of impositions, allowing the addresser to deliver "a re-dressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of actions unobstructed and his attention unrestricted" ([7], p. 129).

II. CULTURE AND POLITENESS

A. Cultural Acceptance

Goody [5] stated that 'joking relations' defended impoliteness as an assumption that no hostility is intended. Thus, any failure to succumb to social protocol expectations could be unintentional in cross-cultural instances. With the convergence of communication through technologies, intercultural communication is now present everywhere [10]. Cultures, today, are grouped into perhaps four main divisions. Ranging from one extreme to another, [10] suggested these pairs: individualistic-collectivist; uncertainty accepting-rejecting; implicit-explicit; and monochromic-polychromic. These divisions may not only affect communication but also how politeness differences are accepted, adhered, sustained and tolerated.

As to avoid conflicts or un-bridged politeness differences, efforts to inform of such differences are made possible in trainings and workshops. Kirby and Harter [10] suggested the "respecting, honoring and tolerating diversity" trainings which may be metaphorical as there might not be a foolproof plan in handling cultural differences [10]. Understanding and openness to differences may ease assumption over impoliteness although at a marginalized scale.

B. Cross-cultural Politeness

Cultural difference is one of the hurdles in cross-cultural communication as it is a "reflection of specific cultural values" ([11], p. 154). Leech's Maxims is argued to be unsuitable for the Chinese, or even Asians, as characteristics of politeness differ [12] and the universality of Face Theory [7] is also challenged by [11]- [14]. Gu [12] suggested a new set of values inherent maxim to the Chinese culture with two major differences between Leech's [1] and Gu's [12] maxims which are self-denigration and address. Self-denigration maxim focuses on denigration of self (modesty) and elevation of others. Unlike the English-speaking cultures where flattery is accepted with thanks, the Chinese will denigrate themselves as unworthy of it. The address maxim reflects the respectful greetings of the Chinese whereas in English, a generic 'you' is perfectly acceptable. Surname and gender is used in English, but the Chinese address the surname with title or occupation to convey respect [11]. The Malay adolescents, however, were found to be better at handling disagreement in spoken English rather than in their mother tongue [2]. Heightened awareness to structure in

communicating using their L2 and adopting previously taught polite phrases could support such findings [2].

In any given condition, it is wise to be knowledgeable of cultural differences and level of tolerance across age, gender even social status. Social distance and power differences [15] may even affect expectation of politeness-tact and deference.

C. Social Distance, Formality of Issue and Power Differences

Akerlof ([16], p. 164) defines social distance as "the extent to which individuals share beliefs, customs, practices, appearances, and other characteristics that define their identity". Yet these homogeneous dimensions may be altered by individuals in settling disputes, behaviors guided by social rules, or even use language differently [16]. Social distance is measured by a horizontal scale of 'how well you know a person' ([17], p.103). Meyerhoff [17] elaborates that encoders with greater social power like a customs officer shall receive virtual respect just to speed up matters. 'Cost of imposition' puts politeness in a 'scalar measurement' which would determine reflexive accounts to face-threatening act ([17], p. 91). She also compared several culturally expected norms such as the incorporation on honorific-suffix in Japanese addresses to superior, Germans complete acknowledgement to all honorary titles in addresses and Australians' informality yet "attentive addressing positive face wants" ([17], p.89).

On the level of formality of issue; workplace, education-oriented communication and even official or governmental related issues may encourage adherence to politeness. These formal issues may ensure further face-saving acts and conflict-avoidance gestures even with lower social distance or high familiarity. Informal topics may include leisure, or evolving personal pleasures such as daily activities or merely establishing rapport.

Power difference, on the other hand, is "a vertical measure of superiority and subordinate" ([17], p.103). Proposition of such emphasis on differences may be experienced in any orientation. Organizational communication is one example of how people are led to communicate in "symbolic" ([10], p.188) manners to achieve goals. These symbolic manners may be guided by power differences between articulators.

Social distance, formality of topic and power difference may be affecting adherence to politeness expectations as it may mold behaviors in several ways. Task based behavior which aims at task completion and maintenance based behavior which seek to retain harmonious relationships would preserve politeness unlike self-centered behavior which "serves the need of the individual at the expense of others" ([10], p.234).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Purpose

Degree of power and social distance [15] were studied to further comprehend the impact on adolescents' disagreement strategies. These variables are much influenced by social indexing [18] where situational variables may determine adolescents' politeness choices, and strategic politeness [19]

shall focus on how relationships may affect discourses. Although evidences of interconnectivity may somehow be visible between these variables; Berger, Betsch and Brehmer [20] view them as independent systems.

B. Research Questions

The questions that guided this research are as follows:

Research question 1: Do social distance, formality of issue and power difference affect adolescents' way of handling disagreement politeness both in English and Malay?

Research question 2: In which occasion do adolescents promote disagreement politeness better?

C. Method and Material

The adolescents chosen as the respondents in this research are 49 Malay native speakers with ages ranging from nineteen to twenty-one years old. They completed an adapted discourse completion test [13]. The test is reflexive in nature thus adequate time and place intervals were applied to minimize translation attempts as they were to answer the test both in Malay and English. Prior studies have discovered that this group of Malay adolescents possesses a vocabulary knowledge range of around two to three thousand words level and mediocre speaking ability which is considered to be the average of Malay English-as-L2-learner students [21], [22].

Self-roleplaying is assumed to have taken place in their attempt to produce both implicit and explicit answers. The reaction-induced situations are: Set 1: a supervisor's accusations on the authenticity of an assignment; Set 2: a friend's comments on the data stated in a thesis; Set 3: an acquaintance's comments at a seminar on the effect of modern technology; Set 4: a friend's comments on a university course at a party; and Set 5: a younger sister's comments on female prejudice while watching a movie.

TABLE I: SUMMARY OF QUESTION SETS

Sets	Recipient	Power Difference	Social Distance	Issue	Situation
Set 1	Supervisor	++P	++D	Formal	Accusing
Set 2	Friend	-P	-D	Formal	Offering an improvement
Set 3	Acquaintance	+P	+D	Formal	Reacting to an issue
Set 4	Friend	-P	-D	Informal	Reacting to a comment
Set 5	Younger sister	--P	--D	Informal	Criticizing

This test method suits the present adolescents better since an interview method might just hinder honest answers due to extreme awareness of observation and the obvious factor of time consumption. Liang and Han [13] suggested that to avoid public face threatening situations, Asians would steer away from disagreements. In addition, Asians are deemed to be harmonious "collectivists" as whilst Westerners are generally regarded as expressive "individualists" [23]. As Liang and Han [13] also used more comprehensive scenarios including face threatening (shameful) situations and a variety of power differences and social differences situations [15], the test shall enable these L2 respondents to self-role play and offer responses that are almost equivalent to in reality.

IV. ANALYSIS

The data collected underwent several analyses before interpretative data could be useful. This triangulated procedure began with identifying the types of disagreement: irrelevancy claim, challenge, contradiction, and counterclaim [24]. Next, politeness strategy for disagreement taxonomy [25] was also employed to identify the types of disagreement. Markers of linguistics strength i.e. soft, medium and strong expression of disagreement are also labeled. Partial agreements, positive comments (pc) and humor shall fall under soft expression while medium expression contains occasions of a definite negative statement (ns) or contradiction including words like *yes* and *no*. Strong expressions of disagreement include rhetorical questions, intensifiers (int.), accusatory or judgmental vocabulary (jv) [25].

These labeling allows a much more quantitative data interpretation to be made through IBM SPSS. Correlation of variables - social distance, formality of issue and power difference [15] and mean differences of situational change are then reported.

V. FINDINGS

Earlier findings [2] suggested the language used may not be a determiner for politeness. Place of discussion, even formality levels may also not influence politeness adherence in language used while handling politeness. Therefore further understanding of adolescents' politeness adherence in disagreements seems pivotal as social distance, power difference [15] and formality of issue might significantly influence adolescents' responses and choice to abide to politeness.

A. Social Distance

Five sets of situations were suggested to the present adolescents and they were required to produce a true to reality reflexive responses in their native and second language. Table 2 shows that social distance may significantly influence adolescents' politeness in handling disagreements.

TABLE II: SITUATIONAL CHANGE

Sets	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std Deviation
Set 1	98	1	4	1.85	0.829
Set 2	98	1	4	1.71	1.005
Set 3	98	1	4	1.72	0.835
Set 4	98	1	4	2.29	0.862
Set 5	98	1	4	2.56	0.750

In a formal situation with high social distance (+D), the adolescents would maintain higher disagreement politeness than in a low social distance (-D) situation where they shall ease their adherence to politeness. In sets 1 and 3, high social distance (+D) showed a lower mean (mean=1.85, SD 0.829; mean=1.72, SD 0.835) indicating high adherence to disagreement politeness.

B. Power Difference

Similar to social distance, power difference may also influence an adolescent's obedience to disagreement politeness strategies. Wiser choice of politeness is shown in Set 1while conversing with a supervisor as opposed to sets 4 and 5 i.e. friends and siblings.

The figure above further describes how power difference may affect politeness. Set 5 with a mean of 2.56 (SD 0.750) provides evidence of adolescents' tendency to neglect disagreement politeness strategies as they disagree with addressees of lower power factor (--P). The professionalism barrier (++P) in set 1 and lack of familiarity (+D) in set 3 also increased the tendency for the adolescents to abide to politeness in an agreement.

Set 2 responses are targeted at a friend who has little or no power difference while set 3 addresses an acquaintance who has some potential for power difference. There is some slight variance in the degree of disagreement politeness. However, it is not significant to enough to differentiate between the two scenarios.

C. Formality Factor

The formality of the issue may also promote the adolescents to use better politeness despite lack of social distance (-D) as seen in set 2. Despite the similar lack of social distance (-D) in sets 2 (mean 1.71, SD 1.005) and 4 (mean 2.29, SD 0.862), the mean difference of 0.58 between the two scenarios may significantly suggest that the adolescents' adherence to politeness in handling disagreements may be affected by the formality factor resulting in a reduction in set 4.

However, set 1 may also suggest the intensity of the situation could negate the impact of formality and social distance on disagreement politeness. Set 1, with mean 1.85 (SD 0.829), shows slightly less disagreement politeness compared to sets 2 and 3 despite involving a formal situation with greater power difference (++P) and social distance (++D), i.e., a supervisor. Individual face wants may sacrifice the adolescents' adherence to the expected level of disagreement politeness when an accusation which challenges their integrity is leveled on them.

TABLE III: CORRELATIONS BETWEEN TOPIC, PLACE AND LANGUAGE USED

Sets	Recipient	Power Differ	Social Distance	Situation /Topic	Correlation Value
Set 1	Supervisor	++P	++D	Formal	0.698(**)
Set 2	Friend	-P	-D	Formal	0.878(**)
Set 3	Acquaintance	+P	+D	Formal	0.648(**)
Set 4	Friend	-P	-D	Informal	0.759(**)
Set 5	Younger sister	--P	--D	Informal	0.871(**)

D. Language Used

Familiarity (-D) factor also shows evidence of erosion in adolescents' adherence to disagreement politeness in both mothertongue and L2. Table 3 shows evidence in sets 2 (0.878) and 5 (0.871). The least correlation may be seen in set 1 and 3 at (0.698) (++P, ++D) and (0.648) (+P, +D). This may certify that language used do not affect politeness adherence when Malay adolescents handle disagreement [2].

In both Malay or English language adolescents shall feel as ease when the recipient is (-D)/(-P) where cultural appropriateness and politeness strategies is less addressed. Although with high power difference (+P), accusations,

intimidating and face threatening [13] situation in set 1 may slightly affect politeness though not affecting language used. Responses in Malay may be rushed and lesser proficient L2 users may practice restraint gestures using the limited polite phrases that they were taught and indirectly boost politeness [7].

VI. Discussion

Social distance, formality of issue and power difference would play important roles in determining the level of impact on disagreement politeness among adolescents. It is suggested that disagreement politeness is better promoted when there is a positive gap of social distance (+D) and greater power distance (+P) yet this may be superseded by the formality factor.

Social distance may be an important variable to a culturally-caste society such as India but friendship may not pose a great impact [7]. The young adolescents view friendship as someone who share activities but based on self-disclosure by the adults [10]. Adolescents do still share activities such as completion of assignments or extra-curricular activities but as they proceed to colleges or university - accommodations for 'self-disclosure' friendship are made possible. This shall further extend face-saving acts for face-to face contact friends.

This agrees with [26] where a 'sense of authority' in teacher-student relationship may camouflage disagreements. In such cases, criticism may be the source of such face threatening [7] situation. Pridham [26] further elaborates that while responding to a situation as in set 1, 'sometimes means the message itself is lost ([26], p. 52)."

Liang and Han ([13], p. 7) support this findings as the Chinese and Americans gave "fewer contradictory statements as friends are cherished in both cultures" and 'face wants' is stored. In set 4 where the power difference is also negligible, formality of issues at hand is influential on the disagreement strategies. This is rather coherent with Triandis and Singelis [13] who claimed Americans "are more concerned with giving opinions".
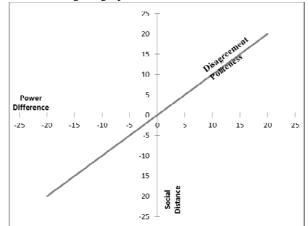

Fig. 1. Disagreement politeness in relations to power & social difference.

Fig. 1 may further describe the relationship between power and social differences against disagreement politeness among the adolescents. As the power and social distance decrease,

the degree of adherence to disagreement politeness shall also show a negative relationship. Thus, it can be assumed that greater power and social distance, adolescents would portray positive politeness.

Formality factor can however significantly suppress the impact of social distance and power difference on the disagreement politeness in Malay adolescents. This can be seen in a comparison between set 2, 3 and 4. Baxter [7] discovered that subjects display greater use of disagreement politeness in discourse with recipients of lesser social distance e.g. friends over an acquaintance [7]. Slugoski [7] further elaborates that social distance can also be influenced by liking and intimacy which shall indirectly have an impact on politeness. It may be concluded that liking and intimacy is perhaps another determining factor for politeness among friendship regardless of formality of issue. If the speaker dislikes an acquaintance, there will lesser tendency for him to observe any disagreement politeness. Below are statements from respondent 31 (R31).

"I thing this content that (is) enough, so we just (add more) explanation (to) the content (to make it) more detail." (1)
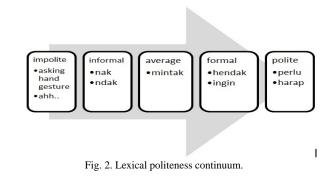
Item E/S2/R31
Ns. Characters

"Modern technology is not become pollition problem. I thing it just a temporarily and did't effect for consumer." (2)

Item E/S3/R31
Sp/np characters

"I don't thing so because the course what I chose is very easy and interesting. That easy to us studies. You has more positive person. (You need to be a positive person)." (3)

Item E/S4/R31
Agg/jv characters

Personal communication with adolescents may suggest that Malay adolescents may be ignorant of formal polite lexis even in their native language. Word choice of formal politeness continuum is shown in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Lexical politeness continuum.

From the informal Malay 'nak' to polite 'harap' may be similar to English language use of 'want' and 'hope.' However, 'want' may be much more acceptable in formal English yet the Malay word 'nak' is rather inappropriate when addressed to a superior and even less in formal context. Parental guidance may lead to such adolescents' inability to adhere to culturally accepted politeness. Lower tone of 'nak'

is adopted to signify politeness and intimacy.

An alarming response was found in set 1, i.e., Malay adolescents' lesser use of disagreement politeness when addressing a supervisor. The Malays acknowledge politeness [27] as a proof of civilization yet where previously were once known to practice self-restraint by remaining quietly attentive in the classroom (out of fear or respect) and never question the grade given, are now suggesting responses such as below in L1:

"Apa yang puan merepek ni, puan? Memang betul saya yang buat. Letih-letih saya buat sedap-sedap je puan cakap bukan saya yang buat. Apa ni? Semak sikit, saya tau lah saya tak berapa pandai tapi takkan bila saya buat mende baik atau di luar jangkaan, puan dah tak percaya!" (4)

Item M/S1/R7
Agg/jv/py/int. characters

As the identity of the respondents were anonymous to the researchers and they were given a due time gap to take the same test in their L2, this respond was obtained from the respondent 7(R7).

"What are you talking about (?) It true, I was doing the term paper. I spent lot of time in doing this, now you are talking that its not my ideas. Please trust me, I know that I'm not enough excellent for you but it doesn't mean that everything I do is not on my own." (5)

Item E/S1/R7
Agg/jv/int/pc. characters

In some cases, better politeness is seen when English language is used but it is very poorly handled in Malay. The above, shows that the respondent used a positive politeness indicator "please" but not in Malay language. This deterioration of politeness is also claimed to be rampant even among the Bruneian Malays [28]. Present local dramas and movies of comedy genre may be among the catalyst to this factor. Responses such as "tahu takpe" (it is good that you know) to any sign of empathy; "padan muka" (suits you) to sympathetic hopes and "tu lah" (that is that) to assure; may be accepted as jokes whilst once adolescents may not dare to even look back to a stern stare given by parents what more grandmothers as it indicates disapproval. Aside from foreign media exposure, lack of parental positive role modeling [28], impolite phrases are accepted as jokes in comics and social networking languages are among potential causes of impoliteness among adolescents.

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH

Studies employing a third language may further certify these findings and is currently being administered. Other variables can be extended to media influences including social network friendship, parental guidance and supervision or perhaps the need for politeness to be embedded as part of a curriculum. Politeness may have also been implied as 'a strategic conflict-avoidance [29],' thus a study on its wide spectrum impact across culture and ethnicity boundaries shall add evidences to the universality of this social indexing. Lastly, power and social distance have been studied by many researchers [7]. Therefore, comparative studies to understand politeness tolerant changes intra-ethnicity may be astonishing.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Politeness may be assumed insignificant and only the recipients of rudeness may find it vital [2]. Although maturity may lead adolescents to politeness, findings in [30] may demand attention. Pre-adolescents too have been reported to acknowledge social distance and power difference [30] in handling politeness. This might suggest their conscious and cautionary choice of politeness might further propose that politeness could be taught and trained. Tolerance over politeness may have deteriorated over generations which results in acceptance over what was once deemed impolite remarks. Adolescents' politeness may have frequently been questioned by many [2], and some may defend them. Unfortunately, language used either first or second language may not be blame for impoliteness [2], neither social distance nor power difference. Although level of issue formality might suggest slight impact, further research with greater focus on the issue may conclude its significance.

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