

# Leech's Politeness Principle

## ——Analyzing a Segment from *Desperate Housewives*

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**Abstract:** Politeness principle is one of the major principles in pragmatic analysis. This thesis first reviews the development of Politeness Principle, and the content of Leech's Politeness Principle, then gives a brief introduction of a television series *Desperate Housewives*, of which one segment will be selected to be analyzed. To illustrate how Leech's Politeness Principle works, that segment has been analyzed in minute detail in the following part. Much fun has been brought out when daily dialogue is appreciated from the perspective of pragmatics.

**Keywords:** Politeness Principle

## 1. Introduction

The phenomenon of “being polite” has long existed among the highest form of creatures in the Earth, and it has been labeled as a virtue and was, is and will be passed on from one generation to the next one.

## 2. Literature review

Geoffrey Leech was not the first to coin the phrase “Politeness Principle”. Before him, a few linguistics and sociologists have noticed the being-polite phenomenon. Back to 1950's, E. Goffman has proposed the term “face”, which is, “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (1955: 5). Brown & Levinson (1978) extend Goffman's notion of face, define it as an individuals' self-esteem, and further distinguish between two kinds of face. The first category is “Positive Politeness”, which is the “redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable.” (1978: 101). Conversely, the second category is negative politeness, which focuses on not imposing on the hearer and intruding on their space.

Based on the above-mentioned theory, Leech (1983) puts forward his understanding of “Politeness Principle”, since he believes that the current prevailing Speech Act Theory and the Cooperative Principle is incapable of explaining and interpreting all the phenomena in language use (Liu Renqing 1987). Leech (1983: 132) splits Politeness Principle into six maxims, which tend to go in pairs as follows:

- (1) Tact Maxim (in impositives and commissives)
  - (a) Minimize cost to *other* [(b) Maximize benefit to *other*]
- (2) Generosity Maxim (in impositives and commissives)

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- (a) Minimize benefit to *self* [(b) Maximize cost to *self*]
  - (3) Approbation Maxim (in expressive and assertive)
  - (a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]
  - (4) Modesty Maxim (in expressive and assertive)
  - (a) Minimize praise of *self* [(b) Maximize dispraise of *self*]
  - (5) Agreement Maxim (in assertive)
  - (a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other* [(b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*]
  - (6) Sympathy Maxim (in assertive)
  - (a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other* [(b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*]
- Geoffrey N. Leech (1983: 132)

In Leech's eye, Irony Principle "enables a speaker to be impolite while seeming to be polite" (1983: 142) and "is an apparently friendly way of being offensive" (1983: 144). On the contrary, the type of verbal behavior known as "banter" is an offensive way of being friendly. Therefore what speaker really means is polite to the hearer and true."(1983: 144)

### 3. Data presentation

This section mainly focuses on displaying the data—a segment from *Desperate Housewives*, a hit American television comedy-drama series—which would soon be analyzed with Politeness Principle.

#### 3.1 Data background

*Desperate Housewives* is an American television comedy-drama series which follows the lives of a group of women, Lynette, Gaby, Susan and Bree in a same community, and exhibiting how they work through domestic struggles and family life. Lynette and Tom is a couple, with Lynette, a capable and intelligent career woman and a mother of 3 boys and a girl as well as an unborn twin, working in advertising to support the family and Tom, thought being funny and humorous, staying at home. Gaby has been married to Carlos, who runs a big advertising company where Lynette landed a position.

However, their friendship is facing crisis and has been called into question. With the to-be-born baby, Lynette's maternity leave is around the corner while Carlos, as a shrewd businessman, is contemplating to fire her during her leave. Lynette, filled with indignant, then decides to issue a lawsuit against Carlos to protect her right. While Gaby is on her way to persuade her husband to give up his original plan, she overhears the decision of Lynette, quarrels with her friend and moves into the camp of her husband. From then on, Lynette and Gaby never meets without quarrel and sarcasm.

#### 3.2 Data show

A segment from the sixth season of *Desperate Housewives* is selected as the focus of this thesis, which is as follows:

Lynette: A TV? You guys didn't have to do that.(1)

Carlos: Yes, we absolutely did given what you've done for us.(2)

Gaby: We have a family rule, that is, you saved our daughter from being squashed by a plane and you get a 60-inch plasma.(3)

Carlos: and a faux leather remote caddy.(4)

Tom: Oh, thanks. This is very generous.(5)

Carlos: Please, we could never make up for what you did for us.(6)

Gaby: or for how I behaved toward you among the past couple of weeks. (7) I was such a bitch.(8)

Lynette: Oh, we both said things.(9)

Gaby: Yeah, but I said a lot worse, a lot louder.(10)

Lynette: Yeah, you did.(11)

## 4. Analysis

In this part, the above-chosen segment is going to be analyzed in minute detail with the help of Politeness Principle by Leech.

Tact Maxim is all about how to treat others, minimizing cost and maximizing benefits to others. Confronting with such a munificent gift as a 60-inch plasma, Lynette half refuses their present, yet accepting it. Sentence (1) reveals that Lynette tries to minimize the cost of Gaby and Solis, employing the Tact Maxim. Sentence (2) has reflected the use of Generosity Maxim, with Carlos striving to maximize the cost of himself. So has sentence (3), in which Gaby gives accounts of what Lynette has performed in the tragedy in front of the heroine to stress that she couldn't thank enough. In sentence (4), Carlos has used another approach, a high-class caddy, to achieve the equal purpose of thanking Lynette. Sentence (4) has again reflected the use of the Generosity Maxim. In Sentence (5), Tom thanks the other couple for the extraordinary generosity they have shown, which is an obvious way of being polite, displaying the use of Tact Maxim. In sentence (6), Carlos maximized the dispraise of himself, especially with the word "never" to show that he thinks he owes everything to Lynette, reflecting the use of Modesty Maxim. Sentence (7) and (8) not only used the Modesty Maxim, but also present the frankness of Gaby. With Gaby being so regretful and frank, Lynette dispels the anger in her mind and comforts her friend that they both have said harsh words in the quarrel, which reveals her effort to minimize antipathy and maximize sympathy between Gaby and herself. Therefore, sentence (9) embodies the use of Sympathy Maxim.

According to the Politeness Principle, since Gaby has apologized to Lynette, Lynette should obey the Approbation Maxim and minimize dispraise of Gaby. But to our surprise, Lynette did dispraise her with a rising tone. It seems that Lynette is expressing her dissatisfaction with Gaby and infringes the Politeness Principle as well as damaging the friendship. Actually, Lynette is a broad-minded woman. What she says is impolite to Gaby and is clearly untrue. Therefore what Lynette really means is polite and true. Her seemingly-impolite behavior is in fact an offensive way of being friendly, showing that she has forgiven Gaby. What fit here is not Politeness Principle, but Banter Principle, which generally works among close friends.

## 5. Conclusion

The most important implication that I could draw from this analysis process, the theories will become "inert knowledge" when presented to the students separately, but can be very fascinating and powerful when combined with examples selected from real life. While I am analyzing the dialogue from *Desperate Housewives*, I exult in discovering the powerful nature of Politeness Principle and become fascinated by Leech's theory. Compelled by this excitement, I've read through the whole book *Principles of Pragmatics*. I've learned more than ever and will learn more in Pragmatics with this interest. Therefore, I suggest in teaching, teachers should combine knowledge and real life together. In this way, not only will knowledge become useful, but students' interest will be intrigued and stimulated, which is of paramount significance.

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