

CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN BRITISH AND INDIAN CHARACTERS IN *A PASSAGE TO INDIA*: A REAPPRAISAL OF POLITENESS THEORY

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This article investigates the discursive dimension of literary texts at the level of character's interaction drawing its evidence from E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). Firstly, the main categories proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) in their seminal study of 'politeness phenomena' are presented together with some of the questions raised by the application of the theory to social psychology and stylistic analyses. This model is then applied to fictional conversations between British and Indian participants in order to discover the ways linguistic strategies are selected to limit other participant's freedom ('negative face') or challenge their personal image ('positive face'). This selection of verbal strategies will convey information about power relations, and the way speakers react to these circumstances. Tentative conclusions call for revision and further research.

1. INTRODUCTION

A major theme in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) is Anglo-Indian relations¹, and this theme is developed in long stretches of dialogue. The novel, therefore, lends itself to an analysis of politeness phenomena which should reveal information about (1) thematic development, (2) characterization and also (3) test the theory in fiction.

The value of pragmatic analyses derives from the combined study of linguistic form, communicative function and context. A pragmatic analysis reveals a textual dimension which otherwise remains blurred: that of texts as part of communicative events, or on the contrary, the worlds implied by the text. In particular, the application of pragmatic approaches to the study of literature can make clear how it is that interpreters can retrieve some meanings which do not arise from words or structures but

from the use of language in context. The most straightforward principles of pragmatics are to be found in conversation, even though it is fictive. But if fictional conversations are purported to depict character's interactions and relations, that is, if they resemble naturally occurring conversations, a very similar influence between linguistic choices and social structures is to be found. At this point the model of politeness theory can provide a balanced understanding of form and context in fiction. However, the benefits of a blending of pragmatics and literary studies do not run in only one direction, and the study of literary conventions can also lead to a better understanding of the basic workings of language (cf. Brown and Gilman, 1989).

The application of the theory to literary discourse has been necessarily more tentative than its original application to social psychology, not only because fewer attempts have been made (Tan, 1991; Simpson, 1989; Sell, 1985, 1985a) but also for the peculiar nature of literary discourse. Methodologically, drama offers better conditions since discourse presentation is not complicated by different degrees of "indirectness", nevertheless some simplification seems advisable to make the model minimally operative when dealing with complete texts.² In narrative fiction the texts are selected for being predominantly conversation, or basically direct speech with indirect speech easily changeable into direct by the analyst (Tan, 1991). The potentialities for an analysis of poetry have also been suggested (Sell, 1985, 1985a) and the conception of a piece of poetry or a complete narrative as an extended turn where maxims of cooperation and politeness are followed or broken can open new horizons less tied to face-to-face (turn after turn) discourse. Pragmatic analysis is accordingly focused on the whole text in terms of selectional and presentational politeness (Sell, 1985). Politeness of selection concerns choices of themes, topics and words so that readers are not offended in any way. On the other hand, politeness of presentation is an extension of the cooperative principle in such a way that the writer following it should make the text fully explicit, clear and understandable. This conception of politeness clashes with two other properties of literary texts: tellability and interest. From this perspective, Forster's novels provide a good set of texts for study, since one of their major themes are Victorian morals and the Forsterian narrator has often the function of making the story clear and explicit.

As it can be seen from the references, the applications of politeness theory to literary discourse, and to the novel in particular have been relatively few, though potentially revealing if we consider its contribution to thematic development and characterization. In a novel such as *A Passage to India* it is particularly relevant and illuminating since Anglo-Indian relations is a central issue developed in long stretches of conversation. The hypothesis may be formulated that these relations will show generally an asymmetrical nature: the British are the rulers and the Indians their subjects. However, the relations are complicated by the fact that the British power to rule India is questioned by some Indian character of the novel on the one hand, and reaffirmed by the majority of the British characters on the other hand.

2. SPEECH ACT THEORY AND POLITENESS

Grice's theory of communication has proved a valuable tool in the analysis of utterance meaning but fails to explain frequent cases of extreme indirectness. Leech

(1983) has proposed a *Politeness Principle* to correct and extend the *Cooperative Principle*, though its scope and power to cope with verbal behaviour vary greatly and, as Brown and Levinson themselves argue, it is not a *Principle* in the sense that it is socially controlled (Brown and Levinson 1987:5). It is also evident that failure to cooperate gets interpreted as cooperation via implicature whereas failure to be polite operates simply as absence of politeness.

A theory which accounts for speaker's meaning will provide first hand information about social variables of the type of status and face management and so can provide insights into the discursive dimension of literary texts.

Speech act theory and politeness theory have proposed explanations of the way linguistic choices affect and express social attitudes and behaviour (Searle, 1975; Brown and Levinson, 1978). Both theories converge on their concern with speaker meaning, ie. what is done rather than what is said. The former establishes a distinction between *direct* speech acts (utterances in which sentence meaning is consistent with speaker meaning) and *indirect* speech acts (when no such relation exists) and the latter have suggested that social processes are involved in the choice.

(1) "Madam, this is a mosque, you have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes; this is a holy place for Moslems." (PI p.42)

The first time Aziz addresses Mrs Moore (a Western female stranger), he is conventionally indirect. Instead of simply saying "go away", he produces a more complex utterance where deference is shown, the directive is not overtly expressed and three reasons for the directive are given. It is obvious that the imperative would have been more efficient but this failure to be maximally efficient suggests a different goal on the speaker's part. Indirectness partly disclaims speaker's responsibility for the speech act since its force is left to interpretation, so it seems that social goals are involved in this way of managing interaction.

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) have based their model on one particular goal: face maintenance (Goffman, 1967). *Face* is the self-image that a person assumes in interaction. It is argued that individuals tend to avoid threats to this image but since face-threatening-acts (FTA) are bound to occur speakers collaborate to lessen them. Two areas where such threats occur have been studied: impositions on the hearer's freedom (*negative face*), and disregard for the hearer's wishes (*positive face*). Directives (commands, requests, advice) are included in the first group while criticism, insult, disagreement and correction typically belong to the second. This simplified version of the theory is more readily applicable to research in contexts such as fiction.

According to the theory, speakers have five options (called *super-strategies*) with regard to FTA's: (i) to perform the FTA baldly, on record, (ii) to use positive politeness redress, (iii) to use negative politeness redress (iv) to perform the FTA off-record, (v) not to perform it. These options are ranked in terms of the seriousness of the threat to face. Positive politeness is divided into 15 substrategies, negative politeness into 10 substrategies, and off-record FTA's can be done in 12 different ways. In the previous example, Aziz is imposing on Mrs Moore's freedom and tells her to go away. The weightiness of this threat is assessed taking into account three variables: relative *power* (P) of hearer and speaker, social *distance* (D) between them, and *ranked extremity* (R) of the imposition. Aziz is an Indian and Mrs Moore a British person in British India

so she can be considered to be more powerful. Horizontally they are distant since it is their first encounter, and the imposition can be ranked as medium. These differences are embodied in Aziz's deferential 'madam' (str.5)³, the indirect command "You have no right here at all" (str.1), and the statement of the general rule "this is a mosque", "this is a holy place for Moslems" (str.8) although these could be interpreted as a strategy of positive politeness: "give reasons" (str.13). Two problems arise at this point, namely the mixing of strategies and their scoring. Brown and Levinson consider them unidimensionally to achieve mutual exclusivity (1987:18). Although empirical data are inconclusive, I share Brown and Gilman's view that this is not the case (1989:166). In my opinion it is a question of length of speech acts:

Goodness, you cut your hair! (...) By the way, I came to borrow some flour
(Brown and Levinson 1978:108)

This is an example given to illustrate strategy 1 of positive politeness ("notice, attend to hearer"). But it can be clearly seen that two different sets of strategies are operating: positive, "I notice you", and the negative politeness hedges "by the way", "I came..." which redress the directive "give me some flour". There is little point in interpreting them independently but there are obvious differences between them. A speaker can flatter (+ face) –to put it bluntly– in order to get the hearer to do something (- face) or even to redress criticism (+ face). The reverse is less often the case. They are not only different but also stand in asymmetric relation, why then should one be more polite than the other? Holtgraves (1992:254) says that they are not and points to what I consider an important inconsistency in the model. Brown and Levinson's theory is mainly devised to account for negative FTA's since strategies of positive politeness are treated as merely subsidiary in an overall tendency to maintain the negative face. It does not need empirical testing to demonstrate that speakers will interpret negative politeness strategies as more polite (than positive politeness strategies) in situations where the negative face is threatened and conversely that positive politeness strategies will be ranked as more polite (than negative politeness strategies) when the positive face is threatened:

(2) *"But Ronny, dear Ronny, perhaps there oughtn't to be any trial."* (PI p.208)

Adela Quested is threatening Ronny Heaslop's positive face, namely she is contradicting him (she no longer intends to marry him but they maintain a friendly relationship). Two positive politeness strategies are present: "dear" is an "in-group identity marker" (Str.4), and "perhaps there ought to..." hedges her opinion (str.6 "avoid disagreement"). This is the predicted use of positive politeness strategies to redress a FTA to the positive face. The following example includes both positive and negative strategies:

(3) *"I suppose you won't come on to the polo with us? We should all be delighted."* (PI p.94)

Ronny Heaslop is addressing Fielding, with whom he has had a tense exchange; they are not very familiar with each other either. Although it is an invitation (the least

threatening of directives) multiple redress is employed. Two negative politeness strategies: str.2 “question”, str.3 “be pessimistic”, together with positive politeness str.1 (attend to H’s wants⁴). Brown and Levinson (1987:18) admit the error of their unidimensional ranking of super-strategies but only offer a partial explanation of the possible confusion between markers of social closeness (positive politeness) and markers of deference (negative politeness). Brown and Gilman propose what seems an adequate treatment of strategies by grouping both types of redressive actions, positive and negative, and including a few-many variable.

A related issue is the scoring of strategies. The model does not account for this question but several proposals have been made. Brown and Gilman basically proposed assigning one point for each instance of the 15 positive politeness strategies and the 10 substrategies of negative politeness.⁵ In my scorings I have proceeded in the following way:

(4) “*Sir, excuse me, no warrant is required under the particular circumstances*”
(PI p.171)

This is Mr Haq, the Inspector of Police, replying to Fielding’s imperative “Produce your warrant” when Aziz is being arrested. There are three strategies of negative politeness to redress the contradiction: the honorific “sir” (str.5), the apology “excuse me” (str.6) and the impersonalization of the passive “no warrant is required” (str.7), so the politeness redress score is +3. This simple procedure can offer a verifiable measure of politeness for most cases though a limit is imposed by a different pragmatic constraint: clarity, as I will explain later on. A different solution is given by Holtgraves and Yang (1992) although they are only concerned with requests as produced and perceived by speakers. Their experiment rated overall politeness of requests by dividing them into address form, act (request proper) and adjuncts (also called *supportive moves*). After the components had been coded, each request was then coded for its overall politeness on a 9-point scale by more than three hundred speakers. Such procedure offers a valuable alternative and its results provide objective standards to assess politeness. As it can be seen, means and ends in stylistics and social studies are running parallel and their points of contact are proving useful for both fields.

The application of the model to literary (Brown and Gilman, 1989) and non-literary discourse (Holtgraves, 1986, 1990) has shown its power of prediction as regards *power* and *ranked extremity* but has also revealed the inadequacy of grouping together intimacy and liking in a single variable, *distance*. For the power variable, the prediction is that the speaker with more power will speak less politely and vice versa. For the extremity variable, the greater the imposition (and therefore the greater the threat) the more politeness. For distance there should be a symmetric relation with politeness: the greater distance the more politeness but it has been demonstrated empirically that the least politeness strategies result in perceptions of the greatest distance (Holtgraves and Yang, 1990). It seems necessary to separate intimacy and affect since they do not covary and reinterpret distance as affect if we want to keep the proposed symmetric relation between distance and politeness (ie greater affect, more politeness). My results substantiate the first hypothesis because in the relations of characters studied for D familiarity leads to affect.

Another aspect which has been questioned is the assumed independence of variables P, D and R. Power, distance and imposition are assumed to have the same effects

on politeness independent of their values. Significant interaction has been shown between power and distance (Holtgraves and Yang, 1990, 1992). Holtgraves and Yang (1992:252) conclude that “when any of the three interpersonal variables reaches a particularly high level, the effects of the remaining variables lessen or drop out completely.” This is not exactly the case in what can be considered one of the FTAs involving the highest degree of imposition in *A Passage to India*. And no examples where this is the case have been found in the novel. After being acquitted in the rape trial, Aziz intends to demand a “preposterous” amount in compensation and Fielding tries to persuade him against it. In the two-page exchange two of Fielding’s turns can be highlighted:

- (5) “Yes, certainly you must let off Miss Quested easily. She must pay all your costs, that is only fair, but do not treat her like a conquered enemy.” (PI p.251)
 (6) “Do treat her considerately. She really mustn’t get the worst of both worlds... Be merciful. Act like one of your six Mogul Emperors, or all the six rolled into one.” (PI p.252)

The two speeches include *hedges* (“certainly”) and above all positive politeness redress (“she must pay...”, “Be merciful”, “Act like one of your six Mogul Emperors” (str.1 “notice admirable qualities”) “or all the six rolled into one” (str.2 “exaggerate approval”). In fact all the speech is an “assertion of the knowledge of the hearer’s wants” (str.9) but directives are expressed directly: “You must... do not treat her... do treat her... be... act...”. Strategies are in accordance with their familiarity but politeness is not forgotten.

Brown and Gilman’s revision of the theory (Brown and Gilman, 1989) includes a few-many variable to be taken into account in the measurement of politeness. But excessive redress can be perceived as impolite because of the imposition derived from lengthening the process of interpretation. A related aspect is the equation between indirectness and politeness. It is an oversimplification to identify indirectness and politeness (Blum-Kulka, 1987) for the reason that an imposition minimised in such a way as to hinder comprehension turns out to impose on the reader.

At least for requests, indirectness and politeness have shown to be connected (Blum-Kulka, 1987). An indirect request has less force and allows greater optionality than the direct counterpart. By the same token, a question is less threatening than a reply due to its greater indeterminacy⁶ (Holtgraves, 1986). This is the case for the so-called “conventional indirectness”. Blum-Kulka (1987) has explained the process of interpretation as a double analysis for clarity and politeness. Tension between ‘be clear’ and ‘maintain face’ should be sustained, otherwise excessive clarity may be achieved at the cost of face. In requests “the politeness of conventional indirectness is derived from the interactional balance between *pragmatic clarity* and *apparent noncoerciveness* achieved by these strategies.” (Blum-Kulka, 1987:144):

- (7) “I say, old man, do excuse me, but I think perhaps you oughtn’t to have left Miss Quested alone.” (PI p.94)

Ronny Heaslop’s redress strategies can be scored +5: *hedges* (“I say... perhaps... ought...”), *in-group identity markers* (“old man”) and the emphatic *excuse* (“do ex-

cuse me”). All this is done to redress criticism of Fielding but the strategies seem excessive for their relative power, distance and the extremity of the imposition. Fielding interprets not only the criticism but also the sarcasm and replies accordingly with apparent naivety: “I’m sorry, what’s up?” although he knows only too well what is happening. Types of indirectness of replies have been examined and related to the speaker’s status (Holtgraves, 1986). Although the act of replying indirectly gives face by itself, there can be a different implication in the use of an evasive reply and a topic shift. The evasive answer still has some connection to the general topic of the previous turn but an abrupt topic change indicates control of the conversation and signals higher status.

Clark and Schunk (1980) also establish a double analysis in indirect requests: the literal meaning and the indirect meaning. The indirect meaning conveys the illocutionary force but it is the literal meaning that conveys politeness (other things being equal). They specify a number of descriptive categories for requests types and the factors that determine their politeness. This detailed analysis could be particularly useful for long conversations between the same participants so that patterns of strategies could be established more precisely than by applying Brown and Levinson’s model. Now I will turn to the results achieved by studies derived from the theory.

Findings in social psychology, though often preliminary, seem to provide a good standard against which to match any appreciation of verbal interaction in fiction. Experiments in this field are producing interesting results highly consistent with the predictions made in the model (Holtgraves and Yang, 1990; Brown and Gilman, 1989). However, some contrasts have been found empirically (Holtgraves, 1992; Brown and Gilman, 1989). Predictions in terms of power and ranked extremity have been checked but some remarks have been made with respect to distance. The evidence calls for a distinction between liking and social distance.

From the work in social psychology, it can be concluded that the model has proved operative in its general explanation of language usage though there are several important questions that call for further testing along the following lines:

- (i) Social distance seems to operate differently from what the theory predicts. Brown and Levinson concede that “liking” might be an independent variable, Brown and Gilman (1989) argue that a division between affection and closeness is necessary. It is true that an increase in distance means less liking but also the more the speaker likes the hearer, the greater the concern with the hearer’s face.
- (ii) The different superstrategies do not seem to operate exclusively.
- (iii) The grading of strategies from positive to negative politeness is not always satisfactory. What is more polite depends on the type of *face threatening act* (FTA).
- (iv) It has also been suggested that the assessment of the *weightiness* of the FTA should not be merely additive.

3. ANALYSIS

Brown and Gilman’s adaptation for drama (Brown and Gilman, 1989) seems an appropriate way to proceed in fiction. It is useful to look for contrasts and so counts of dyads of FTAs were made. Firstly the FTA was identified, then, P, D, R, were

established. Overall politeness was scored by assigning one point for each strategy of redress. A second FTA contrasting in P, D or R was found and the difference was computed as consistent or contradictory with the model. 22 such contrasts were analysed and the following results obtained:

| <i>congruent with power</i> | <i>congruent with distance</i> | <i>congruent with extremity</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 11 | 4 | 1 |
| <i>contradictory to power</i> | <i>contradictory to distance</i> | <i>contradictory to extremity</i> |
| 2 | 2 | 2 |

Congruent with power (-P/+pol; +P/-pol; =P/=pol)
 " " distance (+D/+pol; -D/-pol; =D/=pol)
 " " extremity (+R/+pol; -R/-pol; =R/=pol)

Location in the text (page numbers in brackets):

Mrs Moore/Aziz (42, 144); Adela/Aziz (85, 142); Mrs Moore/Mrs Bhattacharya (63); Callendar/Aziz (72); Military/Aziz (76); Fielding/Aziz (81, 169); Fielding/Godbole (183, 186); Adela/Godbole (91); Ronny/Aziz (93); Ronny/Godbole (93); Ronny/Nawab Bahadur (104, 105); Mrs Derek/Nawab Bahadur (105, 106); Mr Harris/Ronny (104, 105); Fielding/Hamidullah (124, 182); Fielding/Syed Mohammed (124); Fielding/Haq (123, 171); Adela/Antony (142); Callendar/Das (222, 232); McBryde/Das (232); Fielding/students (234); Ronny/Hamidullah (248, 249); Ralph/Aziz (304).

My initial hypothesis was the existence of a power differential between British and Indian characters shown in the novel. All the dyads examined correspond to exchanges between them and although much of the novel is conversation (particularly Parts 1 and 2) it was often difficult to find examples of contrasts, notably of R. Results show strong support for the power hypothesis and also substantiate the predictions for distance. There is not enough evidence as regards imposition to draw conclusions. If the examples are studied, some generalizations can be made. The relations established by Mrs Moore, Adela and Fielding follow a different pattern to those of the rest of characters in that their strategies rarely show differences in status because of their race. Their exchanges also provide contrasts in distance and the explanation of the results is that familiarity and liking grow together in their relations with Indians in the novel. The difficulty with extremity lies in the small number of requests between Indians and Britons. Questions did not offer good examples since contrasts were minimal.

Particular contrasts with predictions can offer a good source of points for commentary. One of such contrasts is caused by Adela's failure to exert her authority over Ronny's servant. The redress of her command makes it ineffective. Fielding's relationship with Syed Mohammed also ignores power differences and the School's principal addresses the Indian with special politeness. At the end of the novel Aziz is treating Ralph Moore for some bee-stings and takes advantage of his superior posi-

tion of doctor to patient. Professor Godbole's speeches are polite regardless of status or distance and thus contradict all predictions in this respect. Situations such as Aziz's trial are difficult to define clearly in terms of the three variables. The judge, Mr. Das, in a superior position to those attending the trial by virtue of his role as judge, but as an Indian he is in an inferior position in relation to the British, this tension is reflected in his variations between on-record and off-record strategies. Finally, the contradictions to extremity can be easily explained. The first takes place when Aziz is arrested. Fielding reacts violently to protect his friend and naturally politeness is forgotten. The second happens at the trial and shows Das's ambiguous position. Two of his requests to Callendar have increased extremity but the second is less polite. This signals the increased tension in the Court and the way he assumes power.

The adoption of a naturalistic analysis has to be made very cautiously but is justified if we consider that we are evaluating variables as perceived by speakers, in our case readers. Conversations in fiction will necessarily resemble natural conversations if writers intend them to be interpreted as such, which is most often the case. Coincidence with predictions supports this. A different question is the assessment of results. Here I have to proceed much more tentatively since measurements and statistics in literary texts have a very limited value in themselves. Another aspect of this type of study which has to be remembered is that politeness is important in so much as it signals interpersonal relations, the true object of study.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This modest contribution to the pragmatics of literary discourse is intended to bring together social psychology and stylistics on the assumption that mutual benefits are to be gained. The application of the model can throw light both on the intradiegetic and extradiegetic levels of literary discourse. The analysis of fictional conversation can be approached through the principles of politeness with little distortion of the original postulates. Problems still remain in particular areas such as the ordering and scoring of strategies or the type of variables but findings support the theory as a model for language use. It has to be further adapted to fiction to meet expectations but its contribution to literary pragmatics can be decisive.

Notas

1. This term simply refers to the relations between British and Indian characters. It should be observed that the term *Anglo-Indian* is meant to represent the English speaking community stemming in part from unions between British men and Indian women (formerly referred to as Eurasians) (Spencer 1966). Forster himself uses the term anachronistically in *A Passage to India* (*Anglo-Indian* instead of *British*, *Eurasian* instead of *Anglo-Indian*) though he later admitted the error.
2. Brown and Gilman (1989:173-4) concentrate on *directives* (threats to negative face) and *criticisms, insults and disagreements* (threats to positive face).
3. Number of strategies make reference to the diagrams in Brown and Levinson (1978): positive politeness strategies on page 107, negative politeness strategies on page 136.

4. It can also be interpreted as an *off-record* strategy “use ellipsis” (str.15) but for the sake of clarity we are deliberately avoiding this set of strategies and concentrating on positive and negative politeness strategies only.
5. For strategies 1 and 5 of negative politeness a wider scoring range is used: from -1 to +2. But we have ignored it because it seems unnecessarily complicate for our present purposes.
6. What is not so evident is why a request for information should be necessarily less imposing than a request for action, as Holtgraves (1986) maintains. An example could be questions about private life.

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