
Politeness of discourse and vocabulary teaching

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Abstract: *The article is a review of the few existing publications dealing with problem of politeness of discourse in the process of vocabulary teaching. While communicatively teaching vocabulary, we should keep in mind that the goal is not just memorization by learners of lists of words, their semantics, combinability, etc. and successful performance of some exercises, but first of all it is the formation of learner's ability to communicate in the target language (to apply the acquired vocabulary as efficiently as possible). From this point of view some issues of politeness of discourse are more crucial than the correct pronunciation of the word or some other aspect of linguistic correctness. Not only stylistic appropriateness makes our utterances polite, but tact also does. Though "tact" is definitely not a linguistic category, it has to be taught in vocabulary classes.*

What kind of utterance is considered to be polite / rude depends on the degree of formality / informality of the situation (the so-called "insider" or "outsider" talk). Language learners should also be aware that irony and sarcasm can turn any polite word into an impolite one. Language learners need both information about unpleasant words and strategies that will permit them to be not only linguistically, but also "politically" correct. Some of such strategies and ways to form them are discussed in the article.

Keywords: politeness of discourse, unpleasant words, slang, curse words, taboo words, irony, dropping the negative, strategies of political correctness.

Introduction

Most ELT publications dealing with vocabulary teaching concentrate on word meaning and combinability (e.g., Carter, 1991, Gairns, 1991). However, while communicatively teaching a language (including its vocabulary) we should keep in mind that the teaching goal is not just memorization by language learners of lists of words, their semantics, combinability, etc. and successful performance of some exercises, but first of all it is the formation of language learner's ability to communicate in the target language. Among the sub-goals is the application of the acquired

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vocabulary as efficiently as possible. From this point of view some issues of politeness are more crucial than the correct pronunciation of the word or some other aspect of linguistic correctness. Imagine a student in class telling the teacher in perfectly correct vocabulary (using existing words, which are clearly audible and properly combined): “What you are driving at is that this theory is wrong.” I can hardly imagine a teacher happy about the statement, as the student has not just made a stylistic error (choosing vocabulary belonging to informal instead of formal style while the situation is formal), but the student was impolite because of this error. On the other hand, a teacher may accept the same idea formulated as follows: “Do you think this theory is false?” The teacher will most probably answer it, not even correcting the vocabulary mistake (“false” instead of “wrong” or “incorrect”).

Thus, what we are trying to prove in this paper is: both linguistic science and language teaching methodology concentrate a lot on lexical correctness and stylistic appropriateness of the applied words, but forget about the necessity of simple politeness of discourse. The problem is that:

- a) politeness is not a linguistic and methodological category and sometimes is difficult to be described,
- b) politeness and stylistics are two linked but different phenomena.

Tactful versus tactless instead of just stylistically appropriate versus stylistically inappropriate

Now let us view what some linguists and ELT specialists think of this issue. Gowers (1987, 21), for example, in his guidebook of efficient writing believes that “when writing a person should be polite and human. Be sympathetic if your correspondent is troubled, be particularly polite if he is rude, be lucid and helpful if he is muddled; be patient if he is stubborn, be appreciative if he is helpful; and never be patronising.” To be human, in his opinion, we should pose to ourselves the following questions:

- 1) Is the writing free from antagonistic words and phrases?
- 2) Is it, where appropriate, tactful, helpful, courteous, sympathetic, frank, forceful?
- 3) Will the tone bring the desired response?

Thus, we may conclude that besides stylistic appropriateness tact makes our writing and oral utterance polite. Though “tact” is definitely not a linguistic category, we totally share Gowers's view that it has to be taught in vocabulary classes. For example, telling a person, especially a man, that

he is “short” is lexically and even stylistically correct, when it corresponds to reality, but it is so painful and humiliating for hundreds of people, so such utterances should be avoided on the motive of politeness rather than stylistic appropriateness (unless, of course, our communicative goal is exactly to offend).

Cultural aspect of being polite

There are some aspects of culture in different countries that may make an utterance impolite: specific taboo words and topics. There is a joke saying that one can speak of very frank sexual issues or drug-taking to a Dutch, but not about how much s/he paid for the new outfit. Though taboo topics are not exactly the sphere of vocabulary teaching (they are rather a sphere of speaking skills and strategies formation), explaining to the students that words like “cheap”/“expensive”, “cost”, “price”, etc. are a sort of “taboo” in small talk is an essential part of vocabulary teaching.

A target language word may have a denotative equivalent (translation) in the students' native tongue, but in one language the word and the concept may be very derogatory, while in another it may be less derogatory or not derogatory at all. For instance, the word “lover” in the meaning “mistress” sounds less (if at all) negative for the French than for Americans. It is essential to explain such issues to the students. Euphemisms should be also recommended to the students, e.g. “novia” in Spanish, which generally means a fiancée, in the meaning of “girlfriend”/“lover”.

Sociolinguistics on politeness of discourse

Also, people of some social groups according to their gender, age, race, nationality, physical defects, etc. may be offended by being addressed to or characterized in some particular way. Basically, nobody likes to be openly included in minorities, they normally prefer to be called “handicapped” or “disabled” to being characterized as “invalids”. This may differ from country to country, so while teaching a language we should inform the learners that some words that they meet in the textbook, however, are to be avoided. Unfortunately not many foreign/second language textbooks and even dictionaries provide this sort of information. Some of these not exactly impolite, but unpleasant words are “universal” (at least in one historic period), e.g., today nobody likes to be described as “fat”, but in many cases these issues have to be purposefully taught in the process of vocabulary teaching. One of the good methods to teach such delicate issues is to watch video where one of the characters speaks without

lexical mistakes but his / her selection of vocabulary is inappropriate from politeness point of view in the corresponding cultural situation. When visualized, these sorts of vocabulary & politeness mistakes become more obvious.

The degree of formality-informality and often even rudeness of the language in use is an indicator of the so-called “insider” or “outsider” talk. People belonging to different social and age groups use more or less formal language communicating with each other. They avoid vocabulary able to conceive connotation as they realise the possibility of misinterpretation, unless, of course, they aim to have a conflict. Informal talk is typical for “insiders” of the same group, so this kind of discourse is generally highly connotative.

According to Hudson (1993, 195-201), such an aspect of speakers' language as its “toughness” deals with gender, social class and age. Teenagers as well as men, especially working-class men, tend to use “cool” language among themselves. People of certain professions (police, military people, sailors, etc.) whose work is connected with high risk or of occupations which are considered as high-risk groups (prostitutes, criminals, drug-addicts) also abuse “strong” expressions. Their talk will be viewed as impolite if used with “outsiders”, as for “insiders”, their talk is considered as normal.

All languages have their restrictions and prohibitions. Most language course-books just ignore them. But our learners hear lots of such words in pop songs and movies and even read them in books, so they feel very stylish using them. Here it is necessary to differentiate between soft, almost literary slang and curses, which are quite admissible in informal friendly talk like “get it” instead of “understand”, or “damn it!”, and really strong expressions, which our adult students do need to understand in order not to feel idiots in definite situations, but should always avoid using.

Slang and curse words can and should be taught to advanced, possibly, even intermediate adult students, as it is a very expressive layer of vocabulary, but two kinds of comments have to be made:

1) slang quickly becomes outdated, so when using it, be sure that people surrounding you also do it, otherwise instead of stylish you'll sound funny;

2) a slang word or phrase may be an exact translation from your language, but in another country it may be socially more/less permissible,

so you must be aware how much informal it is and when/where it is possible to use it. Here the best recommendation is to imitate your surroundings (Do in Rome as Romans do!).

Language learners need both the information about unpleasant words and strategies that will permit them to be not only linguistically, but also “politically” correct. Some of such strategies are described in Gower's (1987) book. A vague word may be preferred to a precise one because the vague one is less alarming; or the natural word may be rejected because it has acquired unpleasant associations. A scientific word may sound “nicer” than a conversational one. It is more polite to say “the dress is unusual/extravagant” than to say straightforwardly that you do not like it. Following such logic the poor have become the lower income brackets, backward countries are developing countries, unsuccessful teachers (and others) are described as coming from the lower end of the achievement range. Even a prison is now sometimes a correctional facility. There are no stupid, backward or troublesome children, they are intellectually unendowed/learning disabled or maladjusted/disturbed – and as like as not underprivileged and socially disadvantageous as well. The old are senior citizens, secondhand cars are pre-owned, a price rise is an upward adjustment, and a loss is a negative contribution to profits. Employees are let go/laid off/dismissed rather than sacked or fired and then they become involuntarily leisured. The word race has become almost unusable because of its overtones of racial discrimination and color prejudice. The word “Negro” was substituted by “African American”, “Indian” by “Native American”, we have to use ethnic origin instead (like “Asian”). Salesmen and station masters have become salespeople and station managers, air hostesses and waitresses - flight attendants - to avoid the sexist implication that only a woman need apply for the job.

This sort of substitution, Gowers (1987) mentions, is natural and often benevolent in intention, but it has its limitations. If the unpleasantness, or the supposed unpleasantness, attaches to the thing itself it will taint the new name, in course of time yet another will have to be found, and so this process will be endless. We do not seem to have done ourselves much good when we assigned the blameless but unsuitable word lavatory to a place where there is nowhere to wash; we merely blunted the language; and now toilet and powder-room are blunted in their turn, substituted by ladies' room and gentlemen's room; restroom, etc. As the process of selecting this or that category of words as “unpleasant” is an ongoing one, language teachers should train students to be sensitive to

vocabulary usage and its change.

Polysemy and politeness

There is one more important issue of vocabulary teaching: one and the same word, taking into consideration polysemy and variety of style, may be polite or impolite. Because of this, even if not meant so by the utterer, it may be perceived as impolite/offensive by the listener. This concerns especially the vocabulary with sexual connotations (e.g., cock) (Sizov, 1999; Prechter, 1999). Pay attention, how just mentioning sexual connotation has changed your perception of the word's semantics!

Generally, the “politeness” or “impoliteness” of the word is tightly linked with the context, situation and culture. The word “liberal” in one context means “human”/“wide” and is not only polite, but also “pleasant” (e.g., “liberal arts” in education), while used as “free” it may be used or perceived as quite a positive word in some cultures and as very negative in others (depending on the origin, religion and/or the degree of religious strictness of the speaker or listener). It is very important for our learners to realize, whether such words are used in order to offend or to please.

Depending upon the formality/informality of the situation and the relation between the speakers, an impolite word may be regarded as acceptable and not hurting a person's feelings. If a proud father, with a corresponding look on his face and a corresponding intonation, says “Only look at this little devil”, he definitely is not saying anything bad.

How irony and dropping the negative can change a polite word into an impolite one and vice versa

Eric Stiens in his Term Paper (1997) introduces the term “dropping the negative” for the opposite to sarcasm/irony phenomenon which occurs when words and phrases that traditionally carry a negative connotation with them (i.e.: “I hate you”, “Bitch”) are used without this connotation present. Dropping is a reversal of traditional sarcasm. Very often, in sarcasm, we have traditionally positive phrases or words being used with a negative connotation. Dropping, then, is negative or derogatory (“unpleasant”) words that are being used in a positive way.

The most prevalent metamessage in sarcasm is that of pretence or “I'm just pretending”. This metamessage, according to Stiens, can be used equally well applied to the phenomenon he calls dropping. The fundamental theory of pretence as a metamessage is what unites these two

forms of unplain speaking.

Dropping always occurs in the context of a relationship between the speaker and the listener. In this way, it is similar to the guilitive. Intonation and mimics cues do not always signal dropping, so it is the relationship that determines whether it can be viewed as dropping or not. We can only view the metamessage of dropping as pretence if the relationship between speaker and hearer has already been established. Dropping would be impossible between strangers.

Dropping is almost a kind of slang, in that it is found traditionally in youth culture and in other 'low-brow' cultures such as blue-collar workplaces. When one looks at higher levels of society where more polite behavior is expected, the instances of dropping become fewer and fewer.

It is because of this, that dropping primarily occurs when people speak in the low register. In W. Labov's (1972) analysis of register, he stated that it depends on who the speaker is and who the audience is. This is true also in dropping. When looking at different examples of dropping, there is great variety. The negative words or phrases can be mild or they can be quite harsh. In each case, the speakers are pretending not to like each other, perhaps to hide some of their affection.

When we look at a conversation between employees, dropping often shows up, especially in blue-collar fields. Stiens (1997) brings the following example (the conversation is taken from the kitchen area of a restaurant. Persons A and B are African-American, while Person C is Caucasian).

A: Hey whitey, throw down those fries.

C: Alright nigger, I'm workin' on it.

A: Well work faster, my man, work faster.

B: Man nigger, he's workin' as fast as he can.

A: Alright. One half with cheese off, one third with bacon and swiss off and ten more halves on the grill. Goddamn I'm good! Hey white boy, you want to work main for awhile?

In this example, we see a conversation that consists almost entirely of various forms of slang, and includes many examples of dropping. While dropping is prevalent among all forms of youth culture, it seems to reach its most extreme within the African-American community. Included in

dropping among African-Americans is the use of the word 'nigger.' This takes on entirely different ramifications and involves a reclaiming of the epithet once used, and still used, to make derogatory remarks about their race.

When looking at the above conversation, E.Stiens points out that person C, a Caucasian, was able to use the word nigger without any negative consequences. This shows how far the relationship between C and his African-American co-workers has evolved.

The pretence theory can be applied here as well. It is once more a case of people pretending that they dislike each other and are angry, when they are not. They continue working together to do their jobs and form a cohesive team. The affection that they feel for each other is masked behind the negative words that they use.

When analyzing the pronunciation of dropping, remarks E.Stiens, we enter a murky area. Often, there is no difference in the actual sound of the utterance compared to how it would sound if it was said in a derogatory way. It is often actions that differentiate between the two. For example a girl says, "I hate you" and then kisses a man. When this takes place between friends it often is a five or a slap on the back that follows (or occurs during) the instance of dropping.

When there is a difference in the way it is said, it is usually in tone and pitch. Derogatory comments tend to be lower in pitch, and when dropping is used, the pitch is higher. Tone during derogatory comments often tends to be flat. When there is a difference in tone, dropping takes on a more singsong rhythm.

We can also differentiate dropping from really derogatory epithets by the response. If it were an actual derogatory remark, there would be conflict involved. However, we do not see conflict in the above example. Rather, we see the derogatory words used as friendly greetings.

Finally, E.Stiens comes to the reasons why dropping occurs. Dropping can occur in many different situations, for many different reasons, but the reasons illustrated below seem to be the most common.

1) Dropping is much more prevalent among males than with females (although it is still employed fairly often by females). This would support the "coolness" hypothesis, which generally tends to be more of a concern among males. It is inappropriate in our society for males to show

affection. Thus, the affection of males must be masked behind these phrases which traditionally have signified dislike.

2) Dropping is also used in cases where aggression exists, but actual conflict would not be appropriate. For example, two friends during a video game were using unfriendly language. We see that conflict did exist, albeit ritualized conflict. A and B were both trying to beat each other. Dropping displaces the aggression that each of them felt into a more socially acceptable form. Just as someone would not use dropping while actually fighting someone, dropping is used when it is a mock fight.

3) Lastly, dropping is an acute example of the 'hollowing out' phenomenon, or that of grammaticalization. This phenomenon occurs when words lose their meaning over time. Through repetition of these phrases, the negative in them ceases to hold meaning. "When a friend calls me a 'bitch', - writes E.Stiens,- I do not think that he is calling me a female dog, nor do I think that he is expressing contempt for me. Rather, I see it as a greeting."

To sum up: in order to teach vocabulary in such a way that our learners communicate politely and adequately we need:

- to analyze the vocabulary to be taught taking into consideration the issues of politeness,

- to treat the "risk-group" vocabulary in a corresponding way (provide the adequate presentation and training).

To decide whether the vocabulary under study belongs to the "risk group", we need to

- read up as many linguistic references dealing with politeness issues as we can,

- look up in dictionaries and thesauruses, whether the vocabulary under study might have "unpleasant" implications,

- while reading fiction and mass media, be sensitive to politeness issues,

- collect data on nonnative speakers (including our students) making impolite utterances not purposefully, but because of lack corresponding information,

- ask native speakers' help (this can be done in person or via Internet).

We applied Likert scale for expert's assessments as it is usually done in semantic research. The respondents are offered a wordlist to evaluate

using the ratings 5-1, depending on whether they agree with the given evaluation:

Table 1. Assessment of vocabulary according to politeness / impoliteness

The words below sound impolite / rude / unpleasant to me:

Wordlist	I strongly agree (5)	I somewhat agree (4)	I neither agree nor disagree (3)	I somewhat disagree (2)	I strongly disagree (1)
- shop-girl					
- stewardess					
- guy					

If the statistical procedure assures us that many enough people choose the “I strongly agree” and “I somewhat agree” answer, the indications for the language teacher are obvious.

Depending on the level of teaching (elementary advanced) we may choose to provide the information about the politeness issues when the word is first introduced or later.

In the first case visual aids are especially useful, but some explanation (discussion) may also be involved.

In the second case, when the lexical item is already known to the learners, dealing with its appropriateness from politeness point of view is a good pretext for vocabulary revision, especially if the topic or situations under study involve several such lexical items.

How to teach vocabulary and its polite application

As the goal of communicative language teaching is providing the learners not “the knowledge about the language” but practically applicable language skills, to present this sort of information to our learners is a very delicate matter. We should not speak too much explaining the politeness/rudeness aspect of the vocabulary, still we do have to offer this information to the learners. Where context provides enough data for the students to make conclusions, probably the best way will be to encourage them to elicit the connotation by themselves, e.g. we can show them two blanks and ask what is wrong with one of them: “Family status: single” and

“Family status: old maiden”.

Here we can speak about deductive (rule given by the teacher examples provided by the students) and inductive (context provided by the teacher rule concluded by the learners) approach. Of course, the two approaches should be combined, depending on the learners, situation and vocabulary under study. But the general tendency today in student-centered approaches is to use the inductive approach.

Deductive or inductive, presentation of words that may possess derogatory connotative meaning has to be contextual. Speaking about connotation of isolated words is practically useless if not harmful. By contextual presentation we mean not only linguistic context on phrase, sentence or text level, but also the extralinguistic parameters such as gender of the speakers or subjects of discussion. Generally speaking, “single” (=not married) is a word with neutral connotation while “bachelor” and “old maid”/“spinster” are connotatively marked. But it is interesting that, at least in English-speaking community, the word “bachelor” may possess both positive (a potential fiancé!!!) and negative (stubbornly not getting married person) connotations, while “old maid” and “spinster” are always offensively negative. Likewise, saying about a lady that she is short is normally OK, but the same description of a man will most probably hurt his feelings.

We recommend giving students the task below:

Mark the sentences as appropriate / polite (+) or straightforward / impolite / tactless (-). If you find the sentence tactless, explain why.

- *When the first settlers arrived to America, it was populated by savages.* ()

- *Michael Jackson is of African American origin.* ()

- *The percentage of Indian population is especially high in former Mexican States.* ()

- *(Inscription in transport) Places for invalid passengers and passengers with babies.* ()

- *(To a shop-assistant) I want blue jeans, not black ones.* ()

[answer key: -, +, -, -, -]

As politeness issues are very contextual (changing depending on the speaker-listener relations, their age, social status, educational level, cultural/national environment, etc.) it is worth dealing with them not only in the process of vocabulary teaching, but also while working with texts, both

for reading and for listening. We can, for example, recommend such a task:

Read the advertisement. Find “sexist” vocabulary in it. Change the text to make it neutral (and respectful towards both genders).

If you want to become a successful businessman you can take our on-line course. You needn't time your learning: you can learn during the coffee-break at your office simultaneously courting your short-skirted pretty secretary or relaxing at home while your wife and children are seated by your side watching TV.

Traditional language-teaching tasks (such as gap-filling, identification of the misused words, making up lists of words, description, role play, discussion of attitudes, paraphrase, interpretation of meaning, “spidergrammes,” making up sentences with the offered words, making up word-combinations with the words from two columns, deciphering pictogrammes) can be modified to use them for dealing with politeness/roughness issues of vocabulary. There also are some specific tasks: rating of vocabulary (according to the degree of politeness/rudeness), recognition of connotatively-marked vocabulary, finding “discriminative” vocabulary in a reading/listening text, changing the text from impolite and negative to polite or vice versa.

Research

The politeness issues of vocabulary teaching were part of a Ph.D. research (Chepik, 2003) which proved that dealing with politeness issues while teaching vocabulary is possible already with Lower Intermediate level students and it is very motivating. Two groups of freshman students at International Black Sea University were for one academic year taught vocabulary in the way described above. Only 5% of students found such teaching difficult, 11% - a little difficult, others believed the level of difficulty appropriate. Not only has the students' discourse become more polite and adequate, but also motivation of participation in vocabulary classes increased and students' test results have improved. The findings of experiment (including a list of potentially impolite/unpleasant words) have been applied in the process of teaching at language preparatory programs at International Black Sea University since 2004.

Conclusion

1. Both the analysis of publications touching the issue of politeness and vocabulary teaching and our modest research support the idea that

communicative teaching of vocabulary demands to include issues of politeness into vocabulary teaching.

2. To be able to do so, deeper linguistic research than exists at the moment is desirable.

3. However, for a start, language teachers can select the “at risk” vocabulary themselves.

4. To present such vocabulary examples (micro texts, video materials) should be provided.

5. Some of the described above task types will be useful to bring this knowledge to skill level.

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