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POLITENESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S SPEECH

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To those,

Without their love and support,

I could not be,

Who I want to be...

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Abstract

Politeness in young children's speech

By:

Khadijeh Gharibi

This study investigates how politeness differs among preschoolers of different genders. To this end, 10 girls and 10 boys at age 4.5 to 5.5 in a kindergarten in Shiraz were recorded. The data obtained through children's naturally occurring conversations. The difference in the number of obliges uttered by boys and girls was very high. Little difference was found between girls and boys in mitigation. Girls and boys were more similar than different in politeness. This result is discussed in relation to peer influence. Children usually differentiated their speech according to age and rank of the addressee. It was expected that children use fewer expressions of politeness to their peers and more to their teachers and adults. The findings in fact confirm this. This fact revealed that preschoolers understand the importance of politeness and try to use more mitigating devices when they talk to adults.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

Impmit : mitigated imperatives
Impunmit : unmitigated imperatives
Dirmit : mitigated directives
Dirunmit : unmitigated directives
Qusmit : mitigated questions
Qusunmit : unmitigated questions
Attmit : mitigated attentional devices
Attunmit : unmitigated attentional devices
Promit : mitigated prohibition
Prounmit: unmitigated prohibitions
Impmitp: children's mitigated imperatives with peers
Impunmit: children's mitigated imperatives with teacher
Dirmitp: children's mitigated directives with peers
Dirmit: children's mitigated imperatives with teacher
Qusmitp: children's mitigated questions with peers
Qusmit: children's mitigated questions with teacher
Attmitp: children's mitigated attentional devices with peers
Attmit: children's mitigated attentional devices with teacher
Promitp: children's mitigated prohibitions with peers
Promit: children's mitigated prohibitions with teacher
Impunmitp: children's unmitigated imperatives with peers
Impunmit: children's unmitigated imperatives with teacher
Dirunmitp: children's unmitigated directives with peers
Dirunmit: children's unmitigated imperatives with teacher
Qusunmitp: children's unmitigated questions with peers
Qusunmit: children's unmitigated questions with teacher
Attunmitp: children's unmitigated attentional devices with peers
Attunmit: children's unmitigated attentional devices with teacher
Prounmitp: children's unmitigated prohibitions with peers
Prounmit: children's unmitigated prohibitions with teacher

APPENDIX

Transliteration symbols

Guide to phonetic symbols used for reporting Persian examples

Symbol	Example
aa	arm
o	saw
u	too
a	hat
e	ten
i	sheep
q	qom
k	kill
l	land
v	voice
p	pen
s	so
ch	change
x	xub
z	zoo
zh	vision
n	noon
y	yard
ʔ	ʔalʔaan
b	bad
t	tea
j	joke
h	house
d	door
r	red
sh	shoe
f	foot
g	good
m	moon

Notes:

1. The /ʔ/ symbol represents glottal stop, and it is used at the beginning of Persian syllables followed by a vowel.
2. The /q/ and /x/ symbols represent Persian-specific consonants.
3. The Persian feature *tashdid* is represented by the repetition of the phoneme that receives it.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0. Preliminaries

Over the past 20 years, a growing number of studies on the topic of politeness have been done, and the topic is currently attracting great interest among scholars. Politeness is highly valued in every day communication. Linguistic politeness, for about more than twenty years, has been an important and productive area of research in pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

In the analysis of politeness, it is important to know what theorists think about politeness in general. Mills (2003) notes that many theorists simply think that politeness is a set of behaviors which can be interpreted clearly. Holmes (1995) believes that in everyday usage the term "politeness" refers to behavior which is somewhat formal and distancing, where the intention is not to intrude or impose. Being polite means expressing respect towards the persons you are talking to and not offending them. Politeness is behavior which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behavior.

Eelen (2001, cited in Mills, 2003) argues that many theorists of politeness think that they know what politeness is and they try to make a clear distinction between 'folklinguistic' notion of politeness and linguistic notion of politeness itself. Watts, Ide & Ehlich (1992, p.3) suggest that we should make a distinction between first order politeness, "the various ways in which polite behavior is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups", that is, common-sense notion of politeness, and second-order politeness, "the theoretical construct, the term within the theory of social behavior and language usage". Eelen (2001) terms these concepts "politeness 1" and "politeness 2". The latter refers to something different from our everyday understanding of politeness and it focuses almost on polite language in the study of verbal interaction.

Fraser (1990) proposed a definition of first-order politeness as a social norm or socially acceptable way of speaking. Fraser (1990) noted that the everyday politeness has been largely ignored by researchers. Most research on politeness has followed the model outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987). Their face-saving model viewed linguistic politeness as a means for strategic avoidance of conflict in social interaction. Watts et al. (1992) noted that this view of politeness does not match the everyday usage of politeness.

Politeness is not a fixed phenomenon. There is conflict within all societies over the notion of politeness. Different languages have different forms and techniques to show politeness. According to Mills (2003), the most important notion in most studies on linguistic politeness is what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior. However, the notion is rarely described or analyzed adequately. Factors of gender, race, class, age, education and knowledge play a major role in the levels of appropriate linguistic behavior within particular societies. She believes that politeness cannot be understood as a set of choices made by individuals, but as a set of practices or strategies which communities of practice develop, affirm and contest.

Mills (2003) argues that politeness should be seen within the context of a community of practice, rather than simply as the product of individual speakers and we need to be aware that there may be conflicts over the meanings of politeness.

Differences between male and female speakers have been explored by linguists without arriving at any general agreement. Women's speech is obviously different from men's. There is a complex relationship between gender and politeness. Holmes (1995) argues that "males and females have different perceptions of politeness, where women consider politeness to be of great importance, whilst in general, men appear to feel politeness is dispensable between intimates. In some public spheres, men seem to regard politeness as necessary".

Are women more polite than men? In response to this question, Holmes (1995) points out that it depends on our definition of politeness and whether or not we accept that same norms of polite behavior apply to men and women. Moreover, it also depends on other variables such as the social class, ethnicity and nationality of the men and women and on the context in which they are talking. Holmes (1995) argues that if we look at the evidence available in the sociolinguistic literature, the overall picture is that, in general, women's use of language appears to be more obviously polite than men's.

Most women enjoy talk and regard talking as an important means of keeping in touch, especially with friends and intimates. They use language to establish, nurture and develop personal relationships. Men tend to see language more as a tool for obtaining and conveying information. (Holmes, 1995, p.2)

Holmes suggests that women are more likely to use positive politeness than men; thus she asserts that "women's utterances show evidence of concern for the feelings of the people they are talking to more often and more explicitly than men's do." (Holmes, 1995, p.6)

Lakoff (1975) argued that woman's language style is further characterized by the use of some elements such as hedges, tentativeness, tag-questions which signal indirectness, mitigation, diffidence and hesitation. In contrast, male speech is characterized as direct, forceful and confident, using features such as direct, unmitigated statements and interruption.

Another area in which researchers of politeness look with interest is the field of child language. Research into children's language acquisition has typically focused on systems central to linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, syntax and the lexicon. Recently, however, it has become increasingly clear that it is important to study the social and interactive components of language as well (Grief & Gleason, 1980).

Pedlow, Wales & Sanson (2001) believe that the difference between two senses of politeness is of great interest in the study of politeness in children's language, because there is evidence that parents are concerned about their children's politeness and explicitly teach them to speak politely. Parents mostly teach their children to use particular forms of politeness (Grief & Gleason, 1980). This finding suggests that much of children's exposure to direct socialization of politeness may refer to everyday politeness rather than politeness as a means of conflict avoidance in social interaction (Pedlow et al., 2001).

According to Kasher (1998), a considerable amount of literature on child language has focused on different types of speech acts, especially requests and directives and on the acquisition of politeness formulas and strategies. A number of interesting points has been revealed by these works. Kasher (1998) states that these studies revealed that 2½ year old children can use and understand question forms of directives. Bates (1976), (as cited in Kasher, 1998) found that 2½ year old Italian children could use "please" in Italian form and after they knew that their direct requests were unsuccessful, they tried to upgrade the politeness of their requests. He also showed that the Italian children by the age of four were using formal address forms in play.

Newcombe and Zaslow (1981), (as stated by Kasher, 1998) also found that English 2½ year old children used question forms and even indirect hints as

directives. However, they suggested that the children were not using these strategies for politeness reasons; rather they used them because of their needs. They expected adults to help them and attend to their needs.

Kasher (1998) mentions that children by a very young age, perhaps by three, can employ strategies for politeness reasons. It is clear from the related studies that politeness is incorporated into children's verbal repertoire during their development.

Children's social use of language is a particularly rich area for studying linguistic differences between males and females. A large number of studies have been concerned with gender differences in children's linguistic behavior. Ladegaard (2003) mentions that the overall conclusion of these studies is that girls' talk is generally seen as collaborative and inclusive with a lot of mitigation. Boys', on the other hand, is usually seen as controlling and assertive, with little or no mitigation. In addition, Leaper (1991) states that the results of several studies in this regard show that preschool boys tend to use more direct and demanding communicative strategies with their peers, while preschool girls typically use more polite and cooperative strategies. Leaper (1991) mentions that these differences emerge at the same age that children are beginning to demonstrate both gender identity and preferences for same-gender playmates.

Grief & Gleason (1980) argues that there is a strong link between children's language and their same-sex parent and imitating the same-sex parent has a great influence on the development of children's speech; for example, there is a preference for direct imperatives in the language of fathers and sons, and indirect imperatives in the language of mothers and daughters. In fact, a parent's own use of politeness formulas provides a model for children's language.

In the present research, first-order politeness was regarded and it was defined in terms of children's use of some polite forms and mitigating devices of politeness. This present study attempts to analyze some features of Persian politeness, as used by pre-schoolers and focuses on the mitigating devices of politeness in their language. The investigation starts with a review of some related studies and then presents the results of the study.

1.1. Objectives of the study

Children are politeness-conscious. They use some linguistic forms and strategies, different from adults', to express politeness in their language. Children in any culture are familiar with a wide range of polite linguistic forms and strategies.

The present study is concerned with children's pragmatic competence. It includes, in addition to grammatical knowledge, social knowledge that acts as a constraint on the communicative process and shapes the way messages are realized in actual social interaction. In order to better understand children's pragmatic competence, this study aims to investigate and determine the relative frequency of the use of standard politeness forms in Persian such as "lotfan (please), mersi (thank you), bebakhshid (excuse me), ..." by pre-schoolers. The present politeness research tries to shed light not only on what children know about Persian politeness, but also on how they use it in their community before they enter school.

There is some research indicating that some gender differences in adults' conversation are present in children's talk as well. McCloskey & Coleman (1992) argue that Children acquire knowledge about stereotyped traits, activities, and roles and they behave accordingly early in their development. Since conversation and language reflect social identity, it is expected that children be sensitive to gender differences in speech at an early age. They state that even young children recognize some features of male and female speech.

Linguistic politeness depends on a variety of factors, including the relative age and social distance between speakers, the context and how well the participants know each other. Becker & Smenner (1986) reported that there is evidence about preschoolers' being able to recognize differences in listener status and adjust their use of politeness routines accordingly. Bates (1976), (as cited in Becker & Smenner, 1986), found preschoolers to be more indirect when requesting an adult than a peer. Preschoolers also address dominant, higher status peers with indirect requests, as they do adults (Ervin-Tripp, 1977). Similarly, dominant children tend to be more direct with less dominant and lower-status peers (Wood & Gardner, 1980).

These findings demonstrate that preschoolers' use of politeness is affected by listeners' age and status. Thus, the present study intended to investigate the effects of these variables on politeness in children's language.

The research questions in this study are as follows:

- 1- What kind of polite forms do preschoolers use in their interactions?
- 2- Do children use more polite forms with adults or older peers?
- 3- What kind of mitigating devices do children use in their language?
- 4- Is there any significant difference in boys' and girls' use of mitigation?

1.2. Significance of the study

Politeness is one of the most important social skills. Children should acquire politeness formulas during their development. Unlike grammar, it is widely accepted that pragmatics is something parents teach to young children as they acquire their L1. Parents and peers provide some strategies, rules, and models that help children to develop their L1 pragmatic ability. According to Gleason and Perlman (1985) unlike the acquisition of syntax and semantics, parents do not leave it to their children to construct their own rules of politeness. Rather they take an active part in explicitly instructing them to use appropriate politeness devices. The pressure on children to speak politely usually starts early in their development. Therefore, the parents' awareness of this phenomenon helps them in teaching the use of politeness to their children.

In addition, a child's polite behavior is considered as a sign of the family's high social status. So, it is important for parents to teach their children the proper use of polite formulas. Grief & Gleason's (1980) stated that parents spend a great deal of effort to teach their children politeness routines and they prompted their children to produce 'please', 'thanks' and 'excuse me' which are the basics of polite vocabulary. So, it is necessary to investigate politeness in children's language in our society.

Many aspects of Persian politeness should be studied and it seems that little attempt has been made to do so in Iran. Politeness phenomenon is one of the fields that has not been properly studied in Iran. Although some research on the topic of politeness in adults' speech has been done in our country, politeness phenomenon in children has not been studied yet. The present study was an attempt to reveal some truth in this regard. The importance of this study lies in the way that children's language research can assist our understanding of language as a whole.

Ervin-Tripp and Mitchell-Kernan (1977) argued that studies of children have commonly been seen as marginal to linguistics, psychology, and other