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Linguistic politeness from an ethological perspective: Theoretical questions and empirical issues

Abstract. Linguistic politeness (LP) refers to the set of "linguistic features mediating norms of social behaviour, in relation to such notions as courtesy, rapport, deference and distance" (Crystal 2008). Although researchers (e.g. Eelen 2001, Watts 2003) agree that it is intimately connected to normativity, group hierarchy and cooperation – the core questions of human ethology and human behavioural ecology – linguistic politeness has largely been neglected from those perspectives (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989 being a notable exception). In this paper we spell out the significance of a naturalistically oriented study of LP, outline a research agenda, and identify a number of methodological problems whose resolution is a prerequisite for such an approach.

Keywords: linguistic politeness, politeness, impoliteness, ethology, language evolution, signaling, normativity, cooperation, group hierarchy

1. Introduction

Recent interest in the topic of language evolution has created a research space for the active pursuit of questions related to the evolutionary origin and development of the *language faculty* – the uniquely human ability to acquire and use natural language. As a results there now exists a considerable body of literature dealing with origin scenarios for many of the central aspects of the language faculty, such as phonology (MacNeilage 2008), morphology (Carstairs-MacCarthy 2010), and syntax (e.g. phrase structure out of computational brain patterns involved in motion, Calvin and Bickerton 2000; or reappropriation of the conceptual "who did what to whom" structure for the processing of semantic role, Bickerton 1997). Despite this, relatively little attention has been devoted to the origins of pragmatic competencies[1]; the capacity for linguistic politeness included.

Consider, for example, the influential taxonomy of the language faculty proposed by Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002). Their account overtly prioritises syntax (or more precisely, the combinatorial capacity for creating recursively organised strings out of discrete elements) by terming it the "faculty of language, narrow sense" (FLN), but also posits two additional components of the "faculty of language, broad sense" (FLB): the conceptual-intentional system and the sensorimotor system. Pragmatic competence does not fit comfortably into any of these proposed classes, but it forms an inalienable part of the human capacity for language. An evolutionary view of language solely as a tool for the transmission of information is both limited and limiting; given what is known about human communication, non-human primate communication, and communication in general, it is abundantly clear that the development of language must have been driven by multiple social constraints, including factors related to diffusing aggression (Lorenz [1963] 2002), promoting social bonds (Dunbar 1996), maintenance of hierarchy and social cohesion (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1989).

Linguistic politeness is a highly heterogeneous phenomenon, subsuming several distinct subtypes, each manifesting themselves via a variety of culture-specific politeness devices. Despite this, the presence of some form of polite linguistic behavior is considered a linguistic universal (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). Researchers agree that it is in essence a *linguistic* phenomenon, rather than a purely sociological or ethnological one (Lakoff 1975, Leech 1983, Watts 2003, Eelen 2001). We will make the case that

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[1]   Sensu Robin Lakoff (1975).

by its very nature linguistic politeness needs to be considered in research on language evolution.

2. Linguistic Politeness

Linguistic politeness is notoriously hard to define[2], but we begin with Crystal's (2008) encompassing definition of LP as those "linguistic features mediating norms of social behaviour, in relation to such notions as courtesy, rapport, deference and distance". In support of this definition we offer the following additional characterizations:

- "[l]inguistic means ... to **reduce social friction**" (Lakoff 1975);
- "strategic **conflict-avoidance** [directed at] interpersonal comity" (Leech 1983);
- "a set of linguistic means for **softening face threatening acts**" (Brown & Levinson 1987);
- "**interpersonal supportiveness**" (Ardnt & Janney 1985);
- "cooperative social interaction and displaying **mutual consideration for others**" (Watts 2003);
- "joint venture directed at **social harmony and equilibrium**" (Fraser & Nolen 1981).

These excerpts are representative of the literature in defining LP functionally in relation to its role in maintaining social harmony and promoting conflict-free interactions. Defining politeness in ways other than functional is difficult due to cultural variation and lack of an established structural description. The specific linguistic devices through which LP is expressed are taken from broad set of possibilities, including:

- explicitness and context-independence; for example, the preferential use of nominals to pronouns, as in: "Give me a nice apple" in contrast to "Give me a nice one";
- the use of complex clause patterns involving, for example, embedding (such as relative clauses) and subordinations (such as hypotactic clauses);

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[2]   "Despite several decades of sustained scholarly interest in the field of politeness studies, a consensual definition of the meaning of the term 'politeness,' as well as a consensus on the very nature of the phenomenon, are still top issues in the current research agenda." (Pizziconi 2006: 679)

"A main problem, we suggest, is the lack of agreement about how politeness should be defined as object of study." (Janney & Arndt 2005: 22)

– the use of "high" register, the use of explicit politeness markers (such as courtesy subjuncts: "thank you", "please", "excuse me");
– the use of passive and circumstantial voices (e.g. "It is regretted that...");
– replacement of personal pronouns with indefinites (e.g. "Somebody might think that...");
– point-of-view distancing, such as the present-past tense switch (e.g. "I was wondering whether...");
– invocation of general rules (e.g. "I'm sorry, but late-comers cannot be seated till the next interval");
– nominalisation (e.g. "I am surprised at your failure" instead of "I am surprised that you failed").

3. Relevance

Research on linguistic politeness has its origins in cultural studies and related disciplines, and has generally been conducted following qualitative methodologies (e.g. see Radcliffe-Brown's foundational study of the concept of respect; 1952: 107ff.). Recently, there has been growing interest in exploring LP phenomena from a more Cognitive Science perspective (e.g. see Escandell-Vidal 1996).

Nevertheless, investigations from an ethological/evolutionary perspective are rare (Eibl-Eibesfeldt [1989] being a notable exception). We find this somewhat surprising given that politeness researchers (e.g. Eelen 2001, Watts 2003) largely agree that LP is closely connected to the core questions of human ethology and human behavioural ecology, cf. e.g. Watts *et al.* (1992: xlv):

> We believe that [politeness] is tied up with the most basic principles of human, socio-cultural organization involving conceptualisations of appropriate individual behavior, in particular linguistic behavior, the structuring of interpersonal relationships within social groups and, above all, the nature and distribution of power.

In this section we illustrate this intimate link by discussing three areas of special interest: normativity, group hierarchy and cooperation.

3.1. Normativity and evaluativity

Politeness phenomena are treated as essentially evaluative and normative. This is how Gino Eelen (2001: 35) characterises *politeness* and *impoliteness*:

> Generally speaking, politeness comprises a positive, and impoliteness a negative evaluation. The noun 'politeness' is associated with the 'civilized' forms of behaviour (Blum-Kulka 1992: 258), as well as with 'tolerance', 'good manners', and 'being nice to people' (ibid.: 257), while the adjective 'polite' strongly correlates with adjectives such as 'appropriate', 'friendly', or 'respectful', and generally leads to 'pleasant' interactions (Ide *et al*. 1992: 290). As Ehlich (1992: 75) puts it, 'polite' actions are *positively marked.*

The presentation of the history of the concept of politeness and its cultural variants is well beyond the scope of this work. We shall only indicate that the origins of the modern English concept of "politeness" dates back to the sixteenth century, when it signified "... socially cooperative behaviour to be displayed by male members of the nobility at court" (Watts 2003: 36). One of the principal elements of politeness so construed was the "ability to carry out civil or familiar conversation" (Watts 2003: 36). Konrad Ehlich ([1992] 2005) posits that the idea of politeness is based on evaluation against a standard. He notes that the standard of politeness first emerged in late Middle Ages and was initially related to the rules of *courtoisie/*courtesy, which regulated the life at court. Later, the *courtoisie* standard was challenged by the competing standard derived from the notion of civilité/civility, promoted by the rising urban culture. The two standards finally settled into the European, and specifically English, notion of politeness as codified rules of ideal interaction.

Certainly, the notion of politeness characterised in this way is culture specific, and as has been demonstrated by numerous studies, conceptualisations of politeness may greatly differ according to variables such as ethnicity, social class, or even gender. However, the same studies testify to the existence of the universal politeness element, which comprises a set of core interactional tactics to show "the considerateness for the other person" (Watts 2003: 14). The universal norm of considerateness together with its culture specific applications constitute the yardstick against which the behaviour of interactants is evaluated (also self-evaluated). Therefore, as Eelen argues, the key problem of research on politeness is to account

for the evaluative character of politeness phenomena (Eelen 2001: 109–111).

In view of the above, politeness researchers are directly concerned with the normative aspects of interaction: inasmuch as politeness standards form the basis of evaluating interactants' behaviour, they constitute interactional norms. Such an assumption lies at the heart of the "social norm view of politeness" formulated by Fraser (1990: 220) and widely accepted in current politeness research (Eelen 2001: 42–43). Even approaches which play down normative sentiments tacitly or openly acknowledge the normative character of politeness. In particular, this is true of Robin Lakoff's and Geoffrey Leech's theories, based on the idea that politeness should be described in terms of conversational maxims derivable from Grice's Cooperative Principle.[3] Lakoff and Leech postulate that politeness, understood as a set of conversational maxims, is an essentially linguistic principle, which regulates the relationship between the semantic meaning of an utterance and its pragmatic sense (Leech 1983: 4, Eelen 2001: 122). Leech is probably the fiercest opponent of including normative considerations in the description of linguistic politeness. He argues that conversational maxims, including politeness related maxims, acquire their normative character only when set in a social context. From this perspective, norms are not taken to belong to the language system as such, and therefore normative accounts (including LP) should be relegated from the discipline of linguistics. However, even Leech is forced to acknowledge that conversational maxims are able to perform their linguistic function only by virtue of being prescriptive rather than descriptive: maxims stipulate what speakers are *required to do* when engaged in communicative acts. Since it is impossible to get rid of normative accounts altogether, Leech emphasises the need to clearly differentiate between the social-normative function of maxims and their linguistic nature (1983: 84).

To sum up, normativity appears to be an indispensable element of linguistic politeness theories. This is the effect of the evaluative character of politeness phenomena, as rules of linguistic politeness are taken by interactants to constitute social norms regulating discursive communication. This has led many researchers to postulate that norms are central to the study of politeness (the social norm view of politeness). Even those who deny normativity a place in a theory of linguistic politeness are

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[3]   For the criticism of the use of Grice's CP by Lakoff and other politeness theories see Dynel 2009.

nevertheless forced to acknowledge that social norms constitute an essential component of the commonsensical understanding of politeness.

3.2. Group hierarchy

Watts *et al*. (1992) specifically highlight "the nature and distribution of power" in their description of politeness quoted above. Hierarchical structure within social groups is typically mirrored (and to a considerable extent, reinforced) by group-specific LP norms and devices. Being intuitively attuned to those norms constitutes an integral part of a speaker's linguistic (pragmatic) competence. Breaches of those principles – such as inappropriate use of honorifics or the T/V distinction – are no less noticeable than breaches of grammatical rules, and appear to be more intensively policed by the conversational group.

    The correlation between the levels of social hierarchy and the degree of elaboration of politeness devices is well documented both between and within social groups. Cultures whose ethos is based on egalitarian sentiments, on the values of friendliness and empathy, are designated as positive-politeness cultures – "the friendly back-slapping cultures, as in the western U.S.A., some New Guinea cultures, and the Mbuti pygmies" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 245). By contrast, cultures which emphasise social stratification, deference, and ceremoniousness are defined as negative-politeness cultures – "the negative-politeness cultures are those lands of stand-offish creatures like the British (in the eyes of the Americans), the Japanese (in the eyes of the British), the Malagasy ... and the Brahmans of India" (Brown & Levinson 1987: 245). Within particular cultures, the relative social standing of an individual predicts the degree of reliance on various LP devices: "elites, whose status rests on social conventions and who resent impositions, tend to keep more social distance around them, and use and expect more politeness" (Pinker 2007: 387–388).

    It is interesting to note that in many languages the earliest addressative forms coding status differences are derived from familial addresses, such "father", "mother", "son", "brother", or "sister", which with the growth of social diversification started to be employed outside the family context as indicative of either egalitarian relations (most importantly "brother") or elitists ones (such as the "father-son" duo) (Ehlich 1992: 82ff).

3.3. Cooperation

The use of politeness can be seen as facilitating cooperation. Conversational corpora indicate that the accumulation of politeness strategies is typically present in two interactional contexts[4]:

– when conversants introduce a goal they intended to pursue by means of conversational interaction, as is the case in the following invitation: "Uh: would it be alright if we came in a little early"[5] (Davidson 1984: 115);

– when conversants signal difficulty in accomplishing a goal that has already been introduced into interaction, as in Turn 2 of the following sequence, where B rejects A's invitation:

Turn1 A: Uh if you'd care to come and visit me a little while this morning I'll give you a cup of coffee
Turn 2 B: > hehh well that's awfully sweet of you, I don't think I can make it this morning. I'm running an ad in the paper and I have to stay near the phone[6] (Atkinson and Drew 1979: 58).

In the first instance, politeness can be seen as serving to recruit a fellow interactant's help in accomplishing a specific goal (e.g. accepting an offer, fulfilling a request, or answering a question). In the other context, it is best explained as a compensation for the inability to forward a previously introduced goal – here, the dominant function of politeness is to ensure that the blockage to the goal accomplishment does not eliminate the possibility of interactants' cooperating in the future.

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[4]   For a longer discussion see Żywiczyński 2010, and specifically for cooperation about intra- and extradiscursive goals in conversation from an evolutionary standpoint, Żywiczyński & Wacewicz 2012.

[5]   The politeness effect of the utterance depends on the use of conventional indirectness, whereby the question format is used to formulate the speech act "invitation". The other politeness strategies include the present-past tense switch ("would" and "came" instead of "will" and "come"), complex clause structure (the use of the embedded conditional instead of a simple assertion such as "I come in early"), and the adjectival "a little", which minimises the imposition.

[6]   The politeness effect of the utterance is created by the use of the delay signal ("hehh") and the announcer ("well"), signaling the speaker's unwillingness to decline the prior invitation, expression of appreciation ("that's awfully sweet of you"), indirectness in formulating the declination component ("I don't think I can make it this morning") and specification of the reason for declining the invitation ("I'm running an ad in the paper and I have to stay near the phone").

When considering politeness in evolutionary terms, a reference can be made to Axelrod's concept of the "tit-for-tat" strategy, thought to stabilise cooperation by means of continual reciprocation of costs. Explaining how cooperation can be promoted in real-life situations, Axelrod makes two statements: (i) stable cooperative strategies tend to "enlarge the shadow of the future," meaning that initial cooperation incurring small cost promotes subsequent cooperation incurring bigger cost; and (ii) "frequent interactions help promote stable cooperation" (Axelrod 1984: 126–133, cf. Mithen 2005: 213–214). Linguistic politeness can easily be conceptualised along these lines – it entails token costs, is easily repeatable and furthermore can be used by conversants to diagnose their mutual commitment to engage in future cooperation involving higher cost (such as forwarding each other's goals).

The evolutionary significance of politeness can also be approached from the standpoint adopted by Henrich & Henrich (2007). In their micro-ecological study carried out on the Chaldean community in Detroit, they observed (i) that people tend to cooperate with individuals who share their norms and expectations (typically members of one's ethnic group) and (ii) that interacting with such individuals actually accrues greater benefits than interacting with individuals who do not share their norms and expectations (2007). Supported by other works (Gil-White 1999, 2001; McElreath, Boyd, Richerson 2003), this led to the formulation of the *dual inheritance hypothesis*, which postulates a dual inheritance of culture and genes, and is based on the following premises: cultural capacities represent adaptations, and cultural learning mechanisms give rise to a robust second system of inheritance (cultural evolution) that operates by different transmission rules than genetic inheritance.

4. A candidate research agenda
of evolutionarily-oriented LP studies

Having made the case that LP falls within the scope of the field of human ethology and human behavioural ecology, we will now outline a number of open research questions related to LP that we think are likely to be of particular interest to naturalistically oriented researchers into human behaviour.

4.1. In search of politeness universals

One of the key theoretical problems in politeness studies concerns the universality of politeness phenomena across cultures and languages. The foundational works in this research area were steeped in the tradition of Western linguistics and sociology. In fact, apart from Brown and Levinson's *Politeness* (1987), all major contributions to the subject from 1970s and 80s were based on the analysis of British or American English (e.g. Lakoff 1973, 1975, Leech 1983, Fraser & Nolen 1981). Nowadays, the question about the universality of politeness is posed in a context of much richer cross-cultural and cross-linguistic research, and is posed much more tentatively. However, the majority of leading authorities in the field agree that members of *each* speech community have a set of linguistic means to express politeness, including *im*politeness (see Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Culpeper 2011, Locher & Bousefiled 2008). Following Robin Lakoff, it could thus be argued that the knowledge of politeness strategies forms an integral part of the pragmatic competence of a particular language user (Lakoff 1973). Such a claim is often accompanied by a stronger postulate that politeness is expressed by a definite set of interactional strategies; however, the distribution in the use of these strategies varies from culture to culture. This gives rise to comparisons to Chomsky's universal grammar in syntax, and the search for the universal grammar of politeness has proven to be as frustrating as the one undertaken by syntacticians inspired by Chomsky.

Many of the recently proposed models of politeness – such as Eelen's "Politeness1/Politeness2" (2001) model or Watts's habitus model (2003) – tend to emphasise the culturally constructed and context dependent nature of politeness rather than the universalistic sentiments of Brown & Levinson, Lakoff or Leech. However, even they seem to affirm the existence of core linguistic means to express politeness. This "nature-nurture-type" controversy parallels a long-running debate in linguistics about the ontogenetic status of syntax: given that the combinatorial mechanism of syntax is universal, but its details are culturally specified, does it result from a genetically hardwired "universal grammar"? Accordingly, determining which of these explanations is more likely for LP would have significance for the ongoing debates on the nature of cultural and linguistic universals (e.g. Evans and Levinson 2009).

4.2. Costs, benefits and stability of linguistic politeness

There is universal agreement among politeness researchers that politeness has a positive, and lack of politeness a negative social evaluation; this would imply the existence of benefits to being polite. However, being polite does not come at any (obvious) cost, i.e. LP is what in signaling theory is known as a "cheap signal" (Van Rooy 2003). A classic insight from signaling theory is that under normal circumstances, signaling strategies devoid of any inherent costs can easily be used for manipulation, and therefore potential receivers usually disregard them as unreliable (Krebs & Dawkins 1984). Accordingly, we could ask questions such as "why isn't everyone polite all the time?" or "why do people (apparently) react positively to polite individuals?" The stability of politeness as an apparently cheap but beneficial strategy is hard to explain unless we assume some kind of inbuilt safeguard against its manipulative use – some cost that is incurred to the polite individual.

One way to see linguistically polite utterances as more costly than non-polite or impolite ones is by positing that the former require more articulatory (e.g. increased length) and cognitive effort of on the part of the speaker. For example, Jan-Ola Östman (1989) (originally intending to verify John Haiman's [1983: 783] famous proposal that "the social distance between interlocutors corresponds to the length of the message, referential content being equal") reached a conclusion about the iconic correlation between the length of an utterance and the degree of politeness communicated by it. Östman's experiments on an artificial language demonstrated that longer messages, either due to the length of a whole sentence or the length of individual words, are consistently interpreted as more formal, and hence more polite, than their shorter equivalence with the same semantic content. A similar point is made by Leech (1983: 108), who explains the increase in length of polite utterances as resulting from growing indirectness of the associated Speech Act.

The relation "more cost = more politeness" was also observed by Brown and Levinson (1987). In their theory, the weight of a Face Threatening Act (FTA) motivates the choice of politeness strategies – the weightier an FTA is, the stronger the politeness strategies which must be used. This view is related to the hierarchisation of politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's system: it is assumed that negative politeness strategies, which require more articulatory and cognitive effort on the part of the speaker, are able to produce stronger politeness effects than are positive politeness strategies, and hence are used in contexts that necessitate increased politeness, that is, where the relative values of personal distance (D), power difference (P), and

the rate of imposition (R) are high. Thus, the weightiness of an FTA can be predicted from the type of politeness strategies that accompany it.

Potential alternative construals of the cost of politeness involve the degree of personal attentiveness (Clark & Schunk 1980) or the analogy to monetary exchanges. The latter is developed by Werkhoffer (2005), who – drawing on Georg Simmel's (1990) *Philosophie des Geldes*) – states that despite being a social construct, politeness, like money, can itself motivate and structure courses of action. Like the value of currencies, the value of polite expressions can fluctuate according to the change in the social order, and like with money one can pay with linguistic resources what is due in a given socio-communicative context. Finally, Van Rooy (2003) has proposed to view LP as a *handicap*, speculating about factors such as "incurring social debt", or greater complexity of polite utterances. To date, however, no account of the costs of polite linguistic behaviour has been offered that could be considered definitive.

It is also possible that LP – or a tendency for greater adherence to the particular politeness standards of the speech community – may be a manifestation of a generalised *norm-abiding phenotype*. On this explanation, being linguistically polite would be a special case of a general phenomenon of obeying the norms of one's social group. As a manifestation of the common underlying trait, the two would co-vary, and so the more linguistically polite individuals are also predicted to more closely observe the non-linguistic social norms. This explanation is compatible with cultural-evolutionary or memetic scenarios, on which LP devices can themselves be considered independently replicating cultural memes – non-functional but viral norms that exploit or "parasitise" our minds adapted for following norms and conventions.

5. Empirical issues

The study of LP, as with most other complex human social behaviours, is complicated by a number of empirical issues related to the collection and analysis of data. In this section we identify a number of the more prominent issues faced by LP researchers hoping to adopt an ethological perspective and suggest a possible first step in undertaking such research.

As was discussed earlier in this text, the usage of linguistic politeness devices is universal across cultures, but the specific strategies adopted by particular groups is culturally determined. Many studies put emphasis on the heterogeneous nature of politeness, underlying the uniqueness of what

it means to polite across cultures. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon cultures politeness is primarily understood as keeping appropriate personal distance; in the Russian culture, politeness, or вежливость (Sifianou 1992), largely boils down to the use of overt politeness markers and avoidance of vulgarisms; the Chinese *limao*, corresponding to politeness, refers to upholding social harmony by means of etiquette (Gu 1990); while politeness among Israelis is subsumed under two concepts – *numis*, which regulates the public sphere and requires the use of formal register, and privately oriented *adivut*, which consists in displaying care and attention (Blum-Kulka 1992).

What is more, speech communities are not monolithic in their perception and use of politeness. A growing number of works indicates that gender is an important factor in the choice of politeness strategies, whereby males preferentially employ distance-closing strategies (i.e. Lakoff's camaraderie strategies [1975] or Brown & Levinson's positive politeness strategies [1987]), while women tend to choose strategies that underline status differences, promote indirectness and conflict avoidance (i.e. Lakoff's strategies of distance [1975] and niceness [2005b] or Brown & Levinson's negative politeness strategies [1987]) (cf. Tannen 1994 and Coates 2003). Brown & Levinson take this point further, insisting that any major distinction in the social fabric of a community is accompanied by a difference in the usage of politeness strategies. Hence, they insist that any informative description of a group's politeness behaviours should be focused on how differential distribution of politeness strategies is related to social parameters and variables which exist in this group (1987: 242ff).

Another problem endemic in the study of LP phenomena is their operationalisation. The intuition of any language user unequivocally suggests that politeness is gradable – that it is possible to produce utterances varying in the degree of politeness. This intuition has been used by many researchers who employed surveys to elicit politeness judgements, i.e. respondents were asked to arrange utterances according to the perceived intensity of politeness effects, rendering lists such as the following one[7]:

> May I borrow your car please?
> I'd like to borrow your car, if you wouldn't mind.
> Would you have any objections to my borrowing your car for a while?

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[7]   There have been many attempts to explain the logic of this gradability, with researchers appealing to utterance's length (Östman 1989), speech act indirectness (Leech 1983), or speaker's and hearer's needs (Brown and Levinson 1987), to mention just a few proposals.

> Could you possibly by any chance lend me your car for just a few
> minutes.
> There wouldn't I suppose be any chance of your being able to
> lend me your car for just a few minutes, would there? (Brown
> & Levinson 1987: 143–142)

These endeavors have been accompanied by a growing realization that there are no absolute politeness measures because in real life situations, very subtle changes in the textual, physical or pragmatic context can lead to substantial differences in the perceived politeness of verbally identical utterances (such is e.g. the case of elaborate politeness crossing into irony; cf. Leech 1983, Brown & Levinson 1987). This is related to the hotly discussed problem of linguistic markers of politeness and impoliteness, reflected in the universal lexical-conceptual distinction between *polite-impolite*, and their pragmatic exponents which politeness researchers typically discuss in terms of speech-act indirectness or implicitness as defined by Grice. For this reason, in the current research instead of characterising them as inherently polite, utterances and expressions are considered in terms of their potentiality to be interpreted as polite and conditions under which such interpretations are produced (see e.g. Watts 2003). However, in narrowly defined contexts it does seems possible to build a corpus of utterances that – within those contexts – could be rated ordinally for their relative politeness level with some reliability. Trimmed and annotated, such corpora could then be used to test for correlations with other variables of interest, such as personality traits or the degree of cooperativeness. To give ground to the speculation about LP universals, results obtained in this way should then be compared with data coming from large-scale linguistic corpora.

Finally, the naturalistic account of politeness must not overlook the problem of impoliteness. A growing body of linguistic research on impoliteness suggests that impoliteness should be viewed as distinct form LP (e.g. Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2011; Culpeper *et al*. 2003; Bousfield 2008, Bousfield and Locher 2008); accordingly ethology and human behavioural ecology could provide an important insight into the nature of impoliteness-related phenomena, e.g. relating it to the problem of aggression as envisaged by Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989).

6. Conclusion

Linguistic politeness (LP) is a refractory object of study, variable in its manifestations, lacking a single authoritative definition and difficult to operationalise. At the same time, researchers into LP agree about its cultural universality and intimate links to the foundations of human social organisation. In the sections above, through highlighting the relevance of LP to the key areas of human ethology and behavioural ecology, we have made a case for a naturalistically oriented agenda of research into LP. In particular, since LP is widely considered to be an essentially *linguistic* phenomenon, we point to the need for incorporation of this facet of human linguistic behavior into language evolution research.

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