A cross-linguistic Study of Politeness in Arabic and Russian Scholarly Book Reviews

This presentation provides a contrastive analysis of politeness in academic book reviews written in Arabic and Russian. Previous research has shown that the interpersonal relationship between the reviewer and the reviewee in printed academic texts plays an important role in this genre’s discourse construction procedure (Hyland, 2000) and that this relationship is treated and manifested differently in texts written by expert users of academic discourse in different linguistic contexts (Itakura, 2013; Itakura and Tsui, 2011).

Although the genre of scholarly book reviewing is considered to be an under-researched one, it nevertheless presents a rich site for analysing evaluative discourse which is very face-threatening in nature, as it involves appraising the contributions of a colleague that entails expressing both; praise and criticism. While reviewers need to strike the right balance between positive and negative evaluation in order to maintain a friendly relationship with the reviewee, the public nature of this interaction intensifies the seriousness of the damage that a critical comment can bring to both the reviewee’s and reviewer’s face (Gea-Valor, 2000). Therefore, reviewers resort to a wide array of face saving strategies to mitigate the face-damage that their opinions can cause. And one of the main aims of the present study is to establish whether the pragmatic mechanisms used to soften evaluative face-threatening acts (FTA) will differ across the two languages. This assumption automatically places the present study under the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, which is based on the premise that people from different cultures interact differently, and that these differences can reflect some cultural values pertinent to each cultural group (Larina, 2005, 2008; Ogierrmann, 2009; Nwoye, 1992; Rathmayer, 2003; Wierzbicka, 1991). In turn, this observation points at the other aim of the present study, that is to establish whether the politeness strategies used by authors to criticize and compliment in an academic context will reflect any culture-specific values. For example, research on Russian politeness shows that Russians value sincerity and directness in their interaction. This has largely been linked to the tendency of Russian speakers to express FTAs such as requests, directives and advice in a direct and unmitigated manner, which can be viewed as highly face-threatening in other languages. Research on Arabic politeness on the other hand shows that the notion of face is central to understanding the phenomenon of politeness; when interacting speakers put considerable effort into giving face to the addressee and avoiding face-damage. This tendency is reflected in aspects such as frequent expressions of self-denigration and excessive and elaborate praise, for example, which are all very common features in spoken discourse (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Qahtani, 2009; Nelson et.al., 1993, 2002, Noor, 2012).

The data comes from forty scholarly book reviews from the field of linguistics written in Arabic and Russian. Instances of praise and criticism will be first identified and counted, and then contrasted. A socio-pragmatic approach will be attempted to contrast the use of face-saving strategies in praise and criticism across the two languages, which will also be accompanied by quantitative analysis. The analytical framework used here is mainly inspired by two theories: Brown & Levinson’s Face-saving model ([1978]1987), which has previously been applied to the study of academic texts and Goffman’s (1967) theory of face. It must be acknowledged that although Brown & Levinson’s framework has received a lot of criticism, it nevertheless remains the most comprehensive approach to politeness up to date, especially within the field of cross-cultural politeness. Preliminary cross-cultural analysis has revealed that there are significant differences not only in the proportions of positive and negative comments across the two languages but also in the reviewer’s pragmatic choices reflecting the amount of face-threat involved for both the reviewer and the reviewee. While book reviews written in Russian can be described as more critical, with criticisms expressed in explicit and unmitigated forms, reviews written in Arabic are far less critical and exhibit instances of excessive and elaborate praise and instances of self-denigration, which are common features in spoken discourse.

While this study aims at providing a detailed description of an under researched academic genre, it also provides further insight into aspects of Arabic language that have not been explored, namely the pragmatic aspect of evaluative discourse.

(Cross-cultural pragmatics, Sociolinguistics)
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