

Pragmatic research into children's perceptions of polite ways of talking

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Abstract.

Politeness in various social interactions has been considered and perceived as a practical way of using and applying of good manners and etiquette. The operation of politeness involves the attempt of participants to behave and talk in the way they perceive polite in a particular situation. This paper is an exploration in the pragmatics about language and interaction between participants to exchange information (e.g. contact, perception, understanding, attitudinal reactions to the communicated content). The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which 7-year-old and 10-year-old children are able to perceive and characterize what a polite way of talking means to them. The paper is based on the quantitative micro-research which was performed in a form of a written questionnaire and a mutual dialogue and took place at a primary school in Poprad, Slovakia. Research questions applied were aimed to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that children, even though they do not know anything about politeness theories, are able to distinguish what the polite way of talking is through linguistic intuition. It is, therefore, the purpose of this paper to study children's politeness perceptions and understanding of various communicational situations. The different content dimensions are exemplified by collected data and the results of the micro-research are examined and evaluated by the use of politeness and pragmatics theories.

Keywords: language pragmatics, sociopragmatics, politeness principle, social interaction

Introduction

In general, politeness in various social interactions has been considered and perceived as a practical way of using and applying of good manners and etiquette. The operation of politeness involves the attempt of participants to behave and talk in the way they perceive polite in a particular situation. The main reason for it is to share their values and create positive emotions and so to build up and/or maintain good interpersonal relationships. Thus, I might say that interaction reflects the participants' perceived moral order of the interactional situation which is their personal perception of "how things should be". (Kádár, 2017)

Having a closer look at the politeness it is necessary to bear in mind that its examination reveals information about the wider circumstances of a communicant. These might include social and cultural values perceived on an individual, language and/or intercultural level. With the roles mentioned the use of politeness principle is concerned. According to Geoffrey Leech (1983), this principle together with conversational maxims is similar to those formulated by Paul Grice (1975). This principle varies from culture to culture: what may be considered polite in one culture may be strange or even rude in another. Generally, the goal of politeness is to make all of the interlocutors relaxed and comfortable with one another.

"For example: Russians are polite in a different way than Americans are, and they have all the means they need to be polite the way their communalities require them to." (Kecskes, 2013).

In some cases the Gricean maxims can be misinterpreted to be a guideline for etiquette and politeness, instructing speakers on how to be polite and cultivated. However, these maxims are strictly meant to describe the commonly accepted traits of successful cooperative communication.

Children as relatively new language users do not know anything about the above mentioned language politeness theory. My personal concern is to study their politeness perception and understanding of various communicational situations, and thus to find out what they consider to be a polite way of talking.

Research design

The purpose of this study is to apply methods of the quantitative research to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that children can distinguish what the polite way of talking is because they have a powerful intuitive sense.

This paper is based on the quantitative micro-research which was performed in a form of a written questionnaire and a mutual dialogue and took place at a primary school in Poprad, Slovakia. The collected data

have been gathered among pupils of different ages and grades, 7-year-olds and 10-year-olds. For the purpose of this study about forty (40) participants have been approached with three questions:

1. What does it mean to talk politely?
2. How do you know what is a polite way of talking?
3. Can you give some examples of polite ways of talking?

The research method of oral dialogue was applied to the younger group of pupils. The methods of brainstorming and snowballing were also applied, especially to the general part of the questions discussed. The third question was answered by each pupil individually since its content concerns a subjective matter. A written questionnaire was used to conduct the research within the older group of participants.

Research results

After the collection of the research data corpus, it was subsequently analysed and collated. Its mutual comparison and summary demonstrates research findings.

Generally, children perceive as polite way of talking to talk in a calm and peaceful manner, without any traces of nervousness, anger, pressure, fatigue or irritation. Also, talking politely is when speakers talk kindly and pleasantly. It means that such an intrinsic environment of a person helps to set a good atmosphere between communicants and so for the communication to reach the positive and mutually successful end. Children have a feeling that somehow irritated person does not talk politely since he/she is controlled by negative emotions.

Not only the use of vocabulary but all the aspects of the voice, its tone, pitch, and intonation contribute to the children's politeness perception. Loud talk and shouting is perceived as impolite, while talking to small children is usually marked by the polite way of talk. People try to raise children's interest, get their attention and trust to provoke their positive reactions, and so they adjust their talk accordingly.

"In the shop they always talk to me politely because they think I'm still small."

The other interesting finding is that polite talk is influenced by the individual character and person's internal features. As an example it was stated that

"Some people are more tolerant and accept opinions of others while some people are stubborn and push only their own opinions."

Surprisingly, children understand that there is a great deal of influence of a family, education, environment, habits, age, social class, communicational topic and the situation in which the communication happens. E.g.:

"In many restaurants waiters do their jobs reluctantly and it is transformed into their talking and politeness to customers."

"Children talk back to their parents at home and so they do the same to their teachers at school."

Unfortunately, the way of talking of many children and adults is often not very polite judging by the choice of their vocabulary. Many respondents mention vulgarisms and swearwords which are being used a lot these days. While analyzing this point I came to the conclusion that the more of these words they use the cooler and more accepted they feel by their peers. It means by using impolite vocabulary children strive for getting some kind of authority and attention.

Children strictly perceive the use of the "magic" words such as *excuse me, please, sorry, thank you* and phrases such as *would you be so kind, could you do me a favour, etc.* as polite. Moreover, they feel that the use of this kind of words eliminates imperative mood which feels more like the wish clause. That is why the hearer becomes more willing and ready to help and fulfill a request. E.g.:

"Could you tidy up your room, please?"

"Would you be so kind and lend me your toy, please?"

Sometimes, however, in Slovak environment a misunderstanding in interpretation can arise when the recipient confuses the imperative mood for a request with yes/no answer. On the other hand, this type of polite imperative is common in the English speaking countries. E.g.:

"Would you like to do the dishes?"

It is claimed that older people apply politeness in their talk, moreover they speak slowly and clearly which also helps to perceive their talk as polite. According to them politeness disappears from the talk of young people since it takes longer to get to the point, there are too many words to say with actually no meaning, and thus it takes too much time. Is it due to busyness of these days or laziness of people to talk more than necessary? Whatever the reason is the shift to egocentrism is obvious. It emerged that the use of polite phrases is considered to be getting obsolete, cliché, even useless and people prefer to talk in short. E.g.:

In the shop: "Where is sugar?" vs "Can you tell me where the sugar is, please?"

At the table: "Give me a tomato sauce." vs "Could you pass me a tomato sauce, please?"

Another interesting finding is that respondents feel that the more anonymous people are, the more polite they talk to each other. They perceive that in bigger cities, public places, trains and planes people talk more

politely than they talk in their families or among their friends and classmates. This tendency was supported by several examples:

"Good morning. Is this seat free, please?"

"Hey, mate, I'll sit here, ok?"

From the research data it is clear that children perceive the use of the formal addressing of a person and the usage of greetings as very polite. On the other hand, slang words are felt to be impolite.

There are some interesting findings in answers of the younger group of children for the first question which usually start with *not*, e.g.:

"Not to talk back or interrupt the other while talking."

"Not to say bless you when somebody sneezes."

And last but not least these children mentioned that to talk politely is to talk with love.

Comparing and contrasting all the answers provided I came up to the results that children learn from people who are close to them and imitate their surroundings either in a polite or impolite way of talking. Actually, they are like a sponge and absorb everything they come across. They are able to treat all the patterns accordingly even if it seems they do not pay a proper attention. E.g.:

"When my parents talk nicely to each other I also talk to them in this manner because I know it is polite."

A: *"Say hello to your parents!"*

B: *"Thank you. I will."*

"Once we went to see my dad's cousin and he started to be really angry and call everybody names and argue with them."

"My grandma told me to take the bus Nr. 7 and I was not sure if it goes to the church so I asked the driver about that. He told me: "What did you drink? Sure!""

Moreover, from the research it is clear that children are learnt politeness not only in talking but also in behaving. The sources are usually parents, grandparents, teachers and other family members. When there is a lack of proper education and adults' authority, unfortunately, children talk and behave according to their mood or free will and they act before they think what is polite or impolite.

"Once a week I would like to have a class of good manners at school where children would be learnt how to talk and behave politely and then all of us would be better people."

Also, respondents keep lots of words in their passive vocabulary and even if they do not use the polite/impolite talk they are able to recognize its meaning and a way of its usage. The situation seems to be the same with learnt words from foreign languages which they apply into their mother tongue, e.g.: increased usage of *please, thank you, sorry*. This might even be attributed to a cultural feature of the Slovak nation's mentality. Lots of English learning children confess that they perceive English language as more polite, respectful and humble than the Slovak language.

Conclusion

The outlined paper strives to determine the extent to which 7-year-old and 10-year-old children are able to perceive and characterize what a polite way of talking means to them. Research questions applied in a quantitative micro-research were aimed to demonstrate the feasibility or defeasibility of the hypothesis that children can distinguish what the polite way of talking is because they have a powerful intuitive sense.

Since politeness in various social interactions has been considered and perceived as a practical way of using and applying of good manners and etiquette, children as relatively new language users do not know anything about many profound politeness theories. There are many handbooks, manuals and guides on the topic how to teach children to behave and talk politely.

According to results of the research it is possible to assume that children's politeness perception and understanding of various communicational situations is clear and evident. On the other hand, the fact the research was done on the sample of already educated children in this sphere can not be denied. So even if the respondents come across the situation when they are not sure what the polite way of talking is they can somehow predict it from their previous knowledge already learnt or observed in their surroundings.

It can be concluded that the research has shown children have a strong sense to identify what a polite talk is and they are able to use it provided their prior knowledge about politeness. Thus it is questionable and difficult to define the extent of their natural intuitive sense applied to recognize it. However, one is known to them: to talk politely is to talk with love.

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