

Meta-pragmatics of Israeli Politeness/Impoliteness^{の脚注}

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イスラエル・ポライトネスについてのメタ・プラグマティクス

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イスラエル人は礼儀を知らない、といわれる。ここでは、言語のポライトネス理論のみに絞り、従来のポライトネス理論、とりわけ欧米の言語学者が日本のポライトネスなどに応用するポライトネス理論が、なぜイスラエルの、ポライトネスに関わる言語活動に適切でないのかを、1. イスラエル人のポライトネスに関わるメタ言語 2. イスラエル人の実際の会話形態、から考察するものである。イスラエルには遠慮、アボイダンスといった、ネガティブ・ポライトネスが欠如していること、ポライトネスは形式主義と反比例すること、そして、この現象にはイスラエルの歴史と民族主義とが深く関わっていること、を結論する。

1. Introduction

Israelis are notorious for being impolite and rude. Non-Israelis say, for example, Israeli drivers honk their horns excessively, Israeli students speak back to their teachers, Israelis eat bulk food before paying cashiers or without paying for it in supermarkets, etc. Americans, regardless whether they are Jewish or not, also talk about Israeli impoliteness. A school teacher who emigrated from the United States quit her teaching job in Israel very quickly, because she "could not stand the students" attitude of speaking back and interrupting' her.

Israelis themselves are aware of non-Israelis' perception of Israeli behavior, and in interactions with non-Israelis they will often acknowledge that people in their society are impolite. However, and interestingly, , Israelis spend their time on discussing what it is polite and what is not. It means that Israelis more or less pay attention to issues of politeness.

I will analyze the issue of politeness/impoliteness in Israeli communication behavior. First, this paper tries to interpret why this idiosyncratic verbal behavior persists in Israel. Second, I will analyze conversation data recorded in Israel. Third, I will analyze Israeli meta-talk about politeness and impoliteness in order to reconsider several theories of politeness in the field of pragmatics.

When considering linguistic politeness, previous studies, such as those of Brown and Levinson (1992), Frazer (1990), Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Watts (1992) have always been highly regarded. Their theories have been positively and negatively criticized and challenged in discussions of cultural specificity and/or lingo-cultural relativism.

In terms of lingo-cultural relativism, Matsumoto (1987), in her study of cultural-specific concepts of politeness, discusses the Japanese concept of 'face' as being more oriented to prestige and status, as opposed to Western understandings of 'face', which are (in theory) not directly connected to hierarchical considerations, so that Brown and Levinson's approach to face-threatening act is not exactly applicable to Japanese politeness (Matsumoto 1987) Departing from Leech's maxims of politeness, which well explain Anglo Saxon linguistic politeness, Gu (1990) proposes new maxims appropriate for Chinese linguistic politeness, emphasizing their self-denigration, balance, and generosity.

Israeli pragmaticians also tried to analyze Israeli ways of communications. Katriel (1986) discussed Israeli direct way of talk (*dugri*), explained how Israelis use this term of Arabic origin, and concluded that *dugri* talk is the core and truthful way of communication in Israel. On the other hand, Bloch

recently conducted a deep analysis of Israeli term *freirer*, a term of Yiddish origin, which could be briefly translated as 'sucker', treating Israeli's avoidance of being *freier*, or *ohitoyoshi* in Japanese, a distinctive phenomenon of Israeli behavior.

Meanwhile, Blum-Kulka reports that many Israelis consider linguistic politeness as superficial and hypocritical (Blum-Kulka 1990, 1992, 1995); on the other hand, Blum-Kulka (1990: 259) emphasizes Israelis' "colored language of mitigation and nick-naming" as an attitude of politeness.

The examples discussed in this paper came from personal observations collected in Israel rather than from a controlled study. As a linguist, a Japanese, and a peripheral observant and participant in the culture, I began to transcribe interactions I observed, participated in, or heard about from friends or acquaintances. Many of them were in English, but others were in Hebrew. In the case of Hebrew, I use approximate English translations. Dialogue (1) shows Israeli directness.

(1) Calling the Israeli embassy in Tokyo

- A. Hello.
I have a question. I am going to stay in Israel starting this fall so I am thinking of studying Hebrew.
- Operator: What do you want?
- A. I wonder whether you teach Hebrew at the embassy.
- Operator: You are going to stay in Israel, right? Then study at Ulpan there, OK? Bye.
(hang up)

This dialogue shows a certain style difference between Japanese and Israeli interaction. The Japanese participant, speaker 'A', tries to give background information before launching into the main part of her question, which is intended to be polite behavior; but the Israeli operator cannot wait to get to the point (to a Japanese it seems that she is irritated by the delay) and says, "What do you want?" This sort of interaction is quite common when talking to Israelis.

Other dialogues are equally revealing:

Dialogues (2), (3) and (4) also show a lack of any politeness marker.

Dialogue (2) occurred when participant 'A' got stuck on a dangerous mountain road and needed instructions on how to make a U-turn. He saw a man on the road, so asked him for help. (If nobody had been available to help 'A', this situation would have been dangerous.)

- (2) A. *Ata yachol le'ezor oti?*
'Could you help me?'
- B. *Yesh li brera?*
'Do I have a choice?'

In an urgent or serious situation like this, Israelis may believe that politeness or formality should be immediately abandoned. Participant 'B's answer was predictable, so he chose to make a little joke (*Do I have a choice?*) even though the situation was rather serious. This answer clearly suggests 'You don't have to bother to ask.'

In dialogue (3), participant 'A' asked how to get into a shopping mall where all the doors seemed to be locked because it was Shabbat:

- (3) A: *Slicha, efo haknisa?*
Excuse me, where is an entrance?
- B: *Sham. Im at dochefet eta deled.*
Just there, if you push the door.

In this dialogue, too, 'B' makes a joke, implicitly claiming that 'A' did not have to ask questions in such a formal way.

From these dialogues above, one might think that Israelis do not have or do not care about politeness. If there is politeness among Israelis, it should be operable within different maxims.

2. Felicity of terms of politeness

In fact, Israelis argue about the significance of politeness markers. Dialogues (4) and (5) connote Israelis' strong attitudes toward use of the markers.

- (4) Man 'A' was sitting in a sauna room when man 'B' came in. 'B' did not shut the door firmly, so the heat of the room started to evaporate. Man 'A' told 'B' to go back to shut the door.

- (4) Man A: *Tisger eta deled.*
'Shut the door'

Man B. Silence (he went back to the entrance close the door, came back, and kept)

silent for a minute).

Tagid 'bevakasha' tischer eta deled.

'Say 'please' close the door.'

Man A. *Ata lo sgarta eta deled tov. Lama ani zarich lehagid 'bevakasha'?*

'You did not shut the door well. Why do I have to say 'Please.'"

Man B. *Tagid 'bevakasha'.*

'Say 'please.'"

Man A. *Lo tzarich.*

'No need.'

There was one more repetition of this conversational pair, i.e. *Tagid 'bevakasha'*. 'Say 'please.'" and *Lo tzarich*. 'No need.' and finally man 'A' said:

'Beseder. Bevakasha.'

'O.K. please.'

Man 'B' obviously felt insulted by not being told, '*Bevakasha*'; on the other hand, Man 'A' refused to say '*Bevakasha*' because he thought that he did not have to do so. What this conversation sequence demonstrates is that both Man 'A' and Man 'B' are concerned with the felicity of the ritualistic expression, '*Bevakasha*' ('please'); they even argue about the use of '*bevakasha*' loud and long, with a great deal of hand movement. They do not reach a compromise for a while, i.e. they do not use the term '*bevakasha*' ('please') simply as a ritualistic or nominal term.

In dialogue (5), a woman 'A' was sipping coffee in a train booth. Suddenly her paper cup fell and the coffee splashed on another woman sitting across from her.

(5) In a train, woman 'A's coffee got spilt on Woman B.

Woman B: *Ma at osa?*

What are you doing?

Woman A: *Amartilach 'slicha'.*

I told you 'sorry'.

This dialogue was conducted—surprisingly—in a calm way. After wiping the spilled coffee by herself, woman 'B' sat back and kept silent. It should be noted, however, that woman 'A' emphasized that she had said '*Slicha*' ('sorry'), and, thus, should not be accountable for Woman 'B's accusation.

3. Metalanguages of Israeli politeness

In Modern Hebrew, there is a term meaning

'polite' and 'politeness': polite, *menumas* (m.) and *menumeset* (f.); politeness, *nimus*. After conducting a deep analysis of family conversations, Blum-Kulka explains that Israeli politeness are exclusively positive. Negative politeness such as avoidance, self-denigration, avoidance, or distancing are not only ignored, but may be considered impolite.

According to Blum-Kulka, ritualistic expressions such as *toda*, *bevakasha*, or use of nicknames including *chamud*, *chamuda* (sweetie) represent examples of positive Israeli politeness as shown in the table below.

Terms of politeness

Toda 'Thank you.'

Bevakasha 'You're welcome.' or 'please.'

Chamud/a 'cutie'

Slecha 'Sorry./Excuse me.'

4. Israeli meta-talk of politeness

Based on interviews, I will present Israeli emic explanations of politeness and impoliteness. Israelis I interviewed mentioned that people should not care about how to speak or how to behave. They say that politeness is hypocritical. Politeness should come from a truthful mind. Politeness should not be acting. Politeness should not be imposed. Israelis do not impose politeness on themselves in public and they do not expect strangers to behave polite in public, either.

Israelis also provide explanations about why they do not care about politeness. Those explanations are usually historical and political. Since the beginning of the Zionist movement when Jewish immigrants to Palestine tried to create new and independent Jews in Israel by denouncing their former European lifestyles, ethics, and traditions. There was a clear opposition between a pioneer spirit and European tradition. Politeness, according to the Jewish concept at that time, symbolized Europe (Katriel 1986).

Some people associate this negation of European-ness with the Holocaust. An Egyptian Jewish middle-aged man told me (6): "We are suspicious of politeness. Look at Europeans, especially Germans who are well acquainted with politeness, etiquette, and manners. They turned out to be dreadful murderers. We do not trust politeness" (6).

More generally, Israelis say, "We have too many problems to think of politeness." In fact, Israel has always suffered from political and economic uncertainty, fear for terrorism, and social problems. Therefore, Israelis have no time or space to think about politeness, although a further analysis of these explanations from rhetorical points of view is warranted.

On the other hand, new immigrants, people engaged in international business, and relatively highly educated Israelis say, "We had better be more polite." Considering age differences, it is younger people who care about politeness. Older people value Israeli toughness and are proud that they have not cared about politeness.

5. Israeli politeness and general pragmatics

Can the dialogues and Israeli emic explanations of politeness be explained through a paradigm of classical studies of politeness, such as Lakoff's principle of politeness, i.e., do not impose, give a choice, and, make a person feel good (Lakoff 1973), or Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle. Leech, after stating the general point that 'politeness concerns a relationship between two participants whom we may call self and other' (1983:131), proposes six maxims such as Generosity Maxim, Maxim, and Modesty Sympathy Maxim (1983:132). Such theories have tended to treat any kind of dialogues occurring in society as universally containing 'politeness'. This universalism of politeness seems not to be applied to Israeli concept of politeness, however.

The approach to honorifics represented by Brown and Gilman (1960), considering relative power and social distance, does not apply to Israeli behavior either, because both power difference and (especially) social distance are relatively ignored.

The politeness theories above may, however, be more suitable for accounting for Israeli conversation styles between people who meet more frequently, for example, co-workers and family members. In contrast, socially distant conversations such as telephone conversations with operators or receptionists, one-time service counters conversation, and question-answer sequences in public settings, are not accompanied by linguistic politeness as defined by Leech above.

6. Politeness and formality

Israeli dialogues described above could be interpreted simply as a lack of formality. As reported by Katriel (1986), the informality and egalitarianism which have been nurtured since the birth of Zionism have permeated into the interactional style of the society as a whole. Informality, being casual, and a lack of negative politeness, which have been considered common among socially close members such as family, intimate friends, members of the same kibbutz, etc., both extend in Israeli society to public interactions with strangers. Status or power differences observed in companies, schools, or the army do not affect the style of interactions nearly as much as they do in languages such as Japanese and English. From the first day of kindergarten in Israel, children are expected to call their teachers by their first names, and they traditionally speak back to their teachers by saying 'you are wrong' or 'you misunderstood me,' while teachers are also expected to respond to them with careful and eloquent explanations rather than direct appeals to authority.⁹

7. Politeness manifested in intimacy and solidarity

One of the reasons why non-Israeli people consider Israelis impolite is because politeness is particularly associated with affect, intimacy and solidarity (Blum-Kulka 1992). Expressions such as *toda*, *bevakasha*, tags such as *nachon?* ('right?'), nicknamings such as *chamud/a* are more often heard among family members and close friends.

Analyzing family dinner talk, Blum-Kulka took certain meta-pragmatic comments of parents and children, and concluded that Israeli politeness is represented by mitigation and colorful language use.

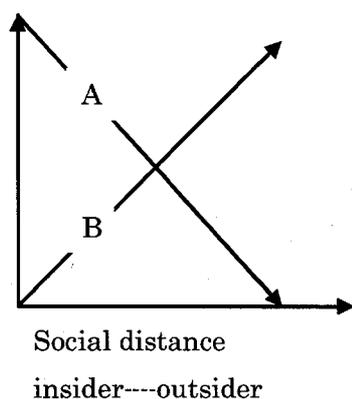
From a social point of view, Israelis tend to be less attentive to politeness with strangers than with intimates; indeed, even Israelis who openly state that people from their culture are rude are likely to point out that, for example, Israeli children are careful to be polite to their grandparents. However, the longer they stay in Israel, non-Israelis also gradually begin to notice that people with whom they frequently meet, e.g., shopkeepers, bank service persons, etc. interact in a more polite way, with positive politeness markers such as *Ma nishma?* ('How are you doing?').

8. To be tough, not to be *freier*

With outsiders, toughness is emphasized. For Israelis, politeness may control verbal or non-verbal behavior of people. Being polite, especially negative politeness, might be associated with being *freier*. The term *freier* could be associated with negative politeness. As a result, negative politeness, i.e. being submissive, obedient, being a yes man, is avoided.

The relationship between politeness and toughness, which is represented by the expression, *Ani lo freier*, (I am not a 'sucker') may be described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Social distance,
politeness, and toughness



Line A: politeness

Line B: toughness; 'not to be *freier*'

If we consider the well-known contrasting Japanese concepts of *honne* ('inner truth') and *tatemae* ('ideology, face'), Japanese people have been described both by Japanese and non-Japanese scholars as having two dimensions to their verbal and non-verbal acts (Allison 2000; Benedict 1989; Doi 1971; Nakane 1970). These contrasting concepts are not unique to Japanese; in American culture, too, there is a marked contrast between private and public behavior, with ideology being focused on public behavior. On the surface level, it appears that Israelis have a highly negative attitude toward *tatemae*, because it can be merely a means for cheating, a hypocritical act. Or, borrowing Hendry's (1993) concept of wrapping, Israelis make as little use as possible of linguistic wrapping as well as any other ritual wrapping (e.g., their informal way of dressing is parallel

to their informal language usage). The lack of boundary between domestic and public, higher and lower, formal and informal, and the lack of clear norms for responding to questions, show the negative attitude of Israeli society toward any kind of empty politeness. It is commonly accepted that cheating with politeness and being cheated by politeness are things which both children and adults should avoid. Good feelings towards one's interlocutor are more likely to be conveyed in such a sequence in a more individual manner, e.g., by making casual jokes and by going out of one's way to give information which may be helpful. The interlocutors avoid formality, especially represented by silence is the ultimate impoliteness, according to Israeli scholars' definition of politeness.

9. Conclusion: lingo-cultural relativism

Culture, a cluster of symbolic meanings (Geertz 1973), manifests itself in simple interactions such as I have referred to above, which can be analyzed in the framework of politeness. How the conversation sequence is initiated, operated, and terminated seems influenced by culturally specific principles. However, at the same time, it is also significant to question the universality of politeness and how universal politeness might be defined. Politeness is not exactly an interpersonal matter, contrary to Leech's 1983 definition and general Western understandings.

On the other hand, Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive politeness and negative politeness helps us analyze Israeli politeness. Here I propose basic concepts of Israeli politeness:

1. Israeli politeness is exclusively positive politeness (negative politeness does not even belong to 'politeness').
2. Politeness is parallel to affect.
3. Less formality leads to politeness.

For Japanese, being associated with formality, politeness is more a public matter, or a behavioral norm required by society. Japanese are commonly considered to be simply and generally 'polite', especially when this is measured by observers based on the Cooperative Principle; however, this impression is contradicted by recent observations of Japanese mother-daughter conversations (Sato and Okamoto

Figure 2. Israeli politeness and formality

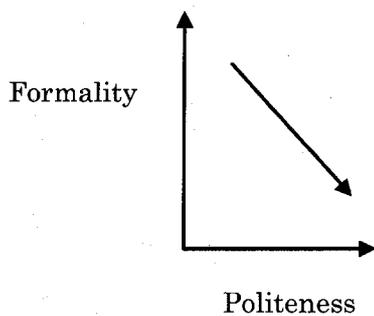
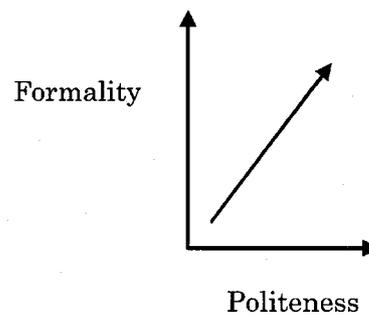


Figure 3. Japanese politeness and formality



1998), which are characteristically uncooperative, indifferent, and silent, and frequently marked by unresponsive silences. When “the public” is absent and only interactional factors are relevant, Japanese culture does not seem to demand much in the way of politeness.

Another question arises in the description and analysis of politeness: Does this represent reality or a social norm/ideology? Ide's (1982) study of the language and politeness of Japanese women shows a mixture of reality on the one hand, and norm, expectation and ideal type on the other; it is not clear where one ends and the other begins. Her study also misses the way politeness can function within society (particularly Japanese society) to present the **user** of polite forms as being a person high in prestige (that is, as a person cultured and educated enough to use polite forms) (Smith-Hefner: 1988, Miyake 1999).

From an Israeli point of view, a constant and clear response is perceived as more polite, rather than keeping silent or simply nodding. In accordance with the Israeli idea that politeness is not associated with public interaction, researchers of Israeli politeness have focused on culturally specific politeness among in-groups. In this sense, Israeli politeness shows a clear contrast with the Japanese concept of ‘politeness’ discussed above. Blum-Kulka starts her paper on family interaction (parallel to Okamoto and Sato 1998) with the sentence ‘Family discourse is essentially polite, enacting its politeness in domain and culturally specific ways’ (Blum-Kulka 1992:259). Meanwhile Japanese scholars started their discussion with norm, associating formality with politeness, so that in-circle politeness is absent. Therefore, the relationship between politeness and

formality are in contrast between Israel and Japan, as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

Thus, this study shows a certain pitfall in which both Israeli scholars and Japanese scholars have fallen—insider politeness in Israel, and outsider politeness in Japanese. Outsiders to Israel feel as though they are being treated with impoliteness and rudeness; to the extent that they remain as outsiders, they do not directly experience the internal politeness of Israeli society. I would suggest more and various studies of culture-specific linguistic politeness.

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