Sylvia Burrow. "Gendered Politeness, Self-Respect, and Autonomy" in *De la Politesse Linguistique au Cameroun / Linguistic Politeness in Cameroon*. Bernard Mulo Farenkia, ed. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.

Abstract

Socialization enforces gendered standards of politeness that encourage men to be dominating and women to be deferential in mixed-gender discourse. This gendered dynamic of politeness places women in a double bind. If women are to participate in polite discourse with men, and thus to avail of smooth and fortuitous social interaction, women demote themselves to a lower social ranking. If women wish to rise above such ranking, then they fail to be polite and hence, open themselves to a wellspring of social discord, dissension, and antagonism. The possibility for women's politeness in mixed-gender conversation threatens more than cooperation, it undermines the possibility for self-respect and autonomy.

I. Introduction

Politeness is ubiquitous to social interaction and for good reason. Politeness oils the

machinery of harmonious social interactions, strengthens the ties that bind us, and

furthers cooperation. Correspondingly, a lack of politeness engenders social friction,

discord, and distrust. Mastering politeness strategies is thus significant to furthering our

own good in socially beneficial ways. Yet, politeness does not further the good of all

persons equally. A significant body of research reveals that politeness strategies are

gendered, in that social standards and expectations of politeness differ between men and

women. Much of this difference can be located in the difference in styles of

communication between men and women. While much of the research on politeness

considers this difference in communication style, it provides an insufficient explanatory

account of the gendered nature of politeness unless it considers how the social norms and values implicit to gendered socialization affect power and control within discourse. Power and control are asserted in dialogue through establishing hierarchical ranking. Dialogue encouraging equality, on the other hand, promotes respect and autonomy between persons. In what follows, I aim to draw out the gendered nature of politeness strategies, pointing out how the subordination, deference, and powerlessness evident in gendered politeness strategies undermines women's possibility for equality in dialogue.

I. Gendered Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1978) recognize that it is difficult to create universal claims regarding gendered politeness strategies. For instance, the claim that women are universally subordinate to men and therefore more polite fails to do justice to the complexities of the interrelationship between gender and power (30). This paper aims to address these complexities, with a focus on how the relationship between gender and power affects women's possibility for respectful discourse. Before proceeding, I wish to clarify two points central to the account I develop. First, my approach discusses rough generalizations regarding gender differences, but these should be taken as such and not as universal claims. The distinction is central to understanding common dynamics of politeness while recognizing that they may nevertheless not hold true for all persons gendered male or gendered female in discourse, either within a society or between societies. Second, in the following discussion I focus on "gender" rather than "sex." It is not uncommon to see the terms "sex" and "gender" used interchangeably, yet they are distinctly different. "Sex" refers to biological features of an individual, determined

2

through various characteristics such as morphology, chromosomal structure, hormonal structure, anatomy, and so forth that are used to determine a person as either male or female. "Gender" refers to social roles presented in a society through stereotypes that set out the prohibitions and expectations of how a man or a woman should act. Hence, to be gendered as a man or a woman is to present one's behaviour, language, appearance, and so forth in a way fitting societal views of what it is to be either a man or a woman.

On Brown and Levinson's view, politeness ought to be understood in terms of face, a concept linked to the idea of upholding virtue or honour and avoiding shame (1987, 13). Participants within a communicative context each negotiate face, working on assumptions and altering those assumptions through their communication. Positive face shows commonality, attraction, and mutuality; positive politeness correspondingly involves communication directed towards satisfying another's wants and desires. Negative face aims at respecting individuality between persons; negative politeness correspondingly is oriented toward unimpeding another's autonomy and attention. Scollon and Scollon (1995) point out two sorts of communication strategies that work to establish either positive or negative face. The first is *involvement*, concern for another's need to be a normal, contributing member of society whose views are supported by others, which the authors associate with positive face (36). The second is *independence*, concern to respect another's needs, desires, and freedom of acti`on, which the authors associate with negative face (37). Speakers use both sorts of politeness strategies in the hope of finding the appropriate amount of connection or independence that will facilitate the smooth and easy flow of communication. But any communication reveals a risk to face, both one's own and another's: the risk is loss of involvement if politeness strategies

exclude others or the risk of loss of one's own independence should one stress too much involvement with another.

Since Brown and Lewiston's work on politeness, much research has addressed the gendered nature of politeness (Lakoff 1990; Coates 1986, 2004; Crawford 1995; Scollon and Scollon 1995). The common theme is that politeness is situated within gendered communication contexts. The difference in communication style between the genders is significant to understanding how politeness is gendered. Dialogue between men often sees men aiming to dominate the conversation, competing for who will hold the floor (Cameron 1997). Manoeuvring for dominance continues if women enter the conversation. Within mixed-gender communication, men tend to use interruptions and delayed responses to establish or maintain control of the conversation, while controlling topic direction through strategies such as disobeying turn-taking roles (Coates 1986, 101). In addition, men may alternately take more talk time within a wide variety of contexts or use silence to achieve and maintain control (Crawford 1995, 43). Women experiencing male domination in conversations is a common affair, with interruption as the most common form of dominance. For instance, one study shows that in mixed communication in public settings men bring about 96% of all interruptions (Crawford, 41). Strategies such as interruptions dominate discourse in taking away the possibility of another person from sharing the floor, thereby removing the possibility of equality in conversation.

In contrast to men, women's conversations are generally concerned with group harmony and involvement. We see this in the point that women are most likely to facilitate conversation. Lakoff (1990) summarizes a number of communication strategies that women generally use to facilitate dialogue, including using diminutives and

4

euphemisms, 'empty' (emotional) adjectives, hedges, questioning intonations, indirect speech, and tag questions. Of these, facilitators are most likely to use tag-questions (Coates 1986, 104). These questions may be either speaker-oriented or addressee-oriented. The former ask the addressee to confirm the speaker's position, while the latter express the speaker's attitude toward the addressee. In either case, tag-questions ask addressees to respond to the speaker, which itself illustrates women's focus on addressees. In conversation with men, such focus is deferential because women suppress or ignore their own discourse needs in favour of addressing those of their male addressees. Thus we can see that women's communication strategies with men tend to be focussed on deference.

Given the dominating nature of men's conversational styles, it is not surprising that men's politeness favours independence strategies. Concerns with independence are associated with individualistic values. Individualistic values are evident in male politeness strategies, which promote status, independence, competition, and so forth (Scollon and Scollon, 239). Hence, men are likely to engage in independence face strategies that emphasize the individuality of the participants, including giving others wide range in options, respecting others' autonomy, needs and interests, and using formal names and titles (37). Independence strategies are associated with establishing dominance strategies in conversation and valuing competition and ranking between individuals, thus these strategies may also be understood as strategies of negative face.

Women's politeness strategies focus on involvement rather than independence, reflecting values of intimacy, connection, inclusion, problem sharing, and so on (Scollon and Scollon, 240). These values are reflected in politeness strategies of paying attention

to others, showing a strong interest in their affairs, using first names, and establishing in-group membership (37). Thus, women's politeness strategies tend toward forming connection and involvement. It is no surprise, then, that women tend to offer the majority of conversational support, particularly within private conversational settings (Crawford, 42). Because involvement strategies aim to forge connections between persons, they may alternatively be understood as positive face strategies. Since women generally engage in involvement strategies, we should conclude that women are more concerned with positive face than negative face.

At this point, the generalization we might arrive at is as follows. Men favour negative face strategies because negative face strategies foster independence and distance between persons; conversely, women favour positive face strategies because these promote connection and involvement. But as we will see below, it seems that women end up using negative face strategies in conversation with men, while men favour positive face strategies with women. What is going on here?

II. Power

An accurate account of the gendered nature of politeness cannot exclude considerations of power. Dolinina and Cechetto (1998) assert that politeness strategies aim to unambiguously establish either equality or superiority-subordination ranking and to maintain that ranking throughout the communication period. Aiming to establish dominance in a conversation is a move functioning to maintain power and control over the discourse. We have seen from the above discussion that men's conversational style is oriented towards controlling conversation and that their politeness strategies support the

6

acquisition of power in the conversation. By contrast, women's strategies aim at solidarity and support. Women do not generally aim to acquire power through dominance, but to establish equality through affirming equal worth and standing of the participants. The very nature of solidarity and support requires this. Hence, we can conclude that men pursue politeness strategies based on power, while women do not. While in agreement with this conclusion, following O'Barr and Atkins (1980), Coates (2004) points out that women's politeness strategies are often wrongly equated with *powerless language*.

Building on Lakoff's (1975) view, O'Barr and Atkins show that women's language generally includes hedges, tag questions, emphatic terms, emotional adjectives, and so forth. The view of O'Barr and Atkins is that powerless language is usually, but not necessarily, associated with women's language. Coates (2004) argues that it is important to separate women's conversational strategies from powerless language. Her argument runs along the lines of O'Barr and Atkins: while many women use powerless language, this is the result of women's position in society rather than their sex, thus powerlessness ought not be equated with sex (Coates,114). We can rephrase this assertion by substituting "gender" for a more accurate account. It is important to ensure that gender is the issue here, for power in society seems to be directly correlated with gender, not sex. Gender discrimination is the product of power relations that subordinate women in society, evidenced in varying ways through laws, policies, norms, and values that systematically harm or disadvantage women. Thus, the position women have in society is that of experiencing gender discrimination. So we can rephrase Coates' claim to say that powerless language ought not be equated with gender. Now, this claim is partly correct

and partly incorrect. It is correct to say that not all powerless language is women's language, because there may be other forms of powerless language, for example that of persons subject to racism or ageism. It is incorrect, however, to think that powerlessness is not associated with gender. Power disparities are implicit in mixed discourse, with the result that women are generally subordinated. This is an issue of gender. As we will see below, gendered politeness strategies play a key role in this subordination of women.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) distinguish three different types of politeness systems. Deference politeness strategies are evidenced in persons considering each other as equals while retaining a certain distance, thus these strategies favour independence. The use of titles as two people greet each other as "Professor White" and "Professor Black" exemplifies mutual deference. Solidarity strategies show that persons regard each other as equals, but as closely involved. So, close friends converse in ways showing involvement. Hierarchical politeness strategies occur between persons not regarding each other as equals, hence these strategies establish one as either subordinate or superior.

Hierarchical face systems are always asymmetrical because persons use different face strategies in a hierarchical system. Scollon and Scollon assert that participants in a hierarchical system "see themselves as being in an unequal social position" and that the person in the higher social position uses involvement face strategies while the person in the lower position uses independent face strategies (46). The asymmetry is one of power. Higher and lower social positions are unequal in that more power is accorded to individuals in higher social positions; those in lower social positions are subordinate, with less power. Power, and hence hierarchical structure, vary according to many factors, of which gender is one. Hierarchies are established on the basis of race, gender, age,

ability, sexuality, economic status, class, religion, and so forth. Now, recall that women tend to use involvement face strategies while men favour independence. We should expect that in mixed-gender conversations women rest in the higher social positions, while men are in the lower social positions. Not so! Precisely the reverse is evidenced in mixed communication.

Women are consistently placed in subordinate positions in mixed conversations. Contrary to Scollon and Scollon, women do not need to *see themselves* as being in an unequal position in order for women to be subordinate. Since face is always being negotiated between interlocutors, face is not a clear cut matter of one person regarding oneself as superior or subordinate. Instead, conversational partners may aim to establish that ranking. I suggest that in mixed dialogue, this is precisely the result of gendered politeness strategies. I am not suggesting that these politeness strategies must be *intentional*; rather, I aim to point out how socialization in politeness strategies produces hierarchies in mixed conversation which place women in a subordinate ranking. My account accords with Deborah Tannen's (1998) view that the relationship between conversationalists determines hierarchical ranking, rather than any one politeness strategy. Below, I develop the view that women are consistently subordinated through politeness strategies that are largely a function of social attitudes and values regarding women as having lesser worth than men.

III. Socialization in Deference

Women's speech is more cooperative and attentive to the needs of others in general, and so women appear more likely to engage in politeness strategies than men (Christie 2000).

Why should women's politeness be focussed on the other? Brown (1980) suggests that women may be more alert to the fact that what they are saying may threaten face. Additionally, women may be much more conscious of how asymmetries of power and status affect relationships and rapport. In contrast, men generally fail to recognize the clear asymmetries of power which, in fact, continue to exist between men and women (Scollon and Scollon, 249). I maintain that women's awareness of power relations is evidenced in women's focus on others' needs, to the detriment of women.

Above, we saw that women are concerned with group harmony and involvement. This focus represents an attention to others' face wants. In conversation with men, such focus is deferential because women suppress or ignore their own face wants in favour of addressing those of their male addressees. Since at attention towards pleasing others' face wants is associated with negative politeness, women tend to respond to men with independence strategies in mixed discourse. Scollon and Scollon point out that men *expect* women to respond with independence strategies to their own involvement strategies; if women respond with involvement strategies, men take this as a challenge to their status, thereby strengthening the asymmetrical hierarchy already established (244). In hierarchical discourse between genders, men's tendency towards involvement strategies secures their ranking in the higher position. This is because involvement strategies in an asymmetrical discourse are key sources of establishing dominance. The authors assert that in hierarchical systems, using involvement politeness strategies is a means of "speaking down" to other persons so as to relegate them to a lower status. Using independence strategies in response is a form of "speaking up" indicating that the addressee is of higher status and that oneself is correspondingly of subordinate status

10

(46). Accordingly, independence strategies in unequal hierarchical settings constitute a form of deference. Here, deference indicates a higher ranking of the addressee and hence, the speaker's lower ranking. Consequently, women favouring deference strategies with men indicate their lower social ranking before them. Why would women generally favour this form of politeness strategy in mixed communication?

The answer lies in socialization. Cameron and Coates (1989) show that socialization trains women to use politeness strategies indicating their subordinate ranking. Socialization trains women in negative politeness strategies, such as apologizing for intruding, using the passive voice, and hedging assertions (Cameron and Coates, 15). These sorts of strategies reflect a great attention to others' face wants. In contrast, men's politeness strategies encourage them to dominate discourse with women, to the detriment of women's positive face wants (Christie 2000, 184). Thus, the powerlessness of women's language is intrinsically built into their politeness strategies in mixed-gender conversations (Coates 2004, 109). Not even outranking men in status seems to permit women to maintain or acquire power in conversation. Woods (1989) shows that female physicians, who clearly have a position of power over patients, consistently experience dominating discourse by their male patients in the form of interruptions, violations of turn-taking, and other dominance strategies. Women's socialization in politeness does little to alleviate the problem of male dominance in conversation. Given that women are more concerned with establishing rapport rather than status, it is unlikely that women's politeness strategies hinge on seeing themselves as subordinate. Women's concern in discourse generally is focussed on others in conversation, which is antithetical to focussing on one's own ranking in relation to another.

In women's conversations with men, women's inclusive overtures are likely to be met with dominance strategies. Dominance strategies are often successful in establishing and maintaining conversational control, particularly through the use of interruption. Interruptions function as a way of controlling topics, rather than allowing an egalitarian introduction of topics. Coates presents research showing that male speakers who are well-informed tend to dominate mixed conversation through talking more and infringing on others' turns more through interruption (Coates 2004, 116). So too, men dominate the discussion through either hogging the floor or limiting the discussion through non-cooperation, such as silence or delayed minimal responses (Coates 119-122).

Thus, it appears that in mixed discourse, men are able to assert power as the dominant person, a move which subordinates women. Those who are subordinated are persons demoted in power and status. Hence, women experience powerlessness in mixed conversation in the sense that they are deprived of power and status *in virtue of* male domination. Women's politeness strategies in these situation does little to alleviate this problem of male dominance in conversation. Since socialization encourages women to use deferential independence politeness strategies in these situations, it only serves to worsen women's subordinate ranking before men.

IV. Oppression

The gendered nature of politeness presents an oppressive double bind for women. If women are to participate in polite discourse, and thus to avail of smooth and fortuitous social interaction, women demote themselves to a lower social caste. If women wish to rise above such ranking, then they fail to be polite and hence, open themselves to a

wellspring of social discord, dissention, and antagonism. This double bind places women in a disadvantaged position for negotiating face while presenting more of an opportunity for experience face-threatening speech. Face threatening discourse is destructive to social relations through generating discomfort, humiliation or anger for the hearer. It also crushes the possibility of cooperation, because persons generally hold the attitude that "if you don't maintain my face in a given interaction, I'm not going to maintain yours" (Christie 2000, 154). The worry is that of losing face and its possible consequence of social breakdown. I maintain that face threatening interactions break down social relations in particular instances in much more worrying ways and with far more harmful consequences to women.

Women who do not conform to gendered expectations of politeness open themselves to greater threats to their wellbeing. Men's speech is generally aggressive, intimidating, and silencing (Coates 1986, 117). As such, men's discourse is likely to be intimidating or threatening to women. In less threatening contexts, the risk of not engaging in politeness strategies includes the breakdown or loss of relationships, but the risk to women may increase if those relationships become hostile. Consider that the danger of personal violence to women by men is so familiar as to appear self-evident. Intimidating or threatening postures, words, or actions are serious threats to women's security and safety, for these often lead to personal assaults (AVAW 2002). Violence is so pervasive a problem that the World Health Organization (2002) has declared violence against women to be a worldwide health issue. Violence against women is the most common form of violence, and it is most common in which societies which make it difficult for women to upset or overturn their socialization in rigidly defined and socially

enforced gender roles (Heise 1998). It has long been recognized that feminine socialization opens the door for violence against women because of the implicit power differential in which women's status in society is devalued. Violence against women is an inevitable consequence of this power differential because it serves essentially as a means of demonstrating power over women – it is a means of social control over women (Vogelman and Eagle, 1991).

Given that social control over women ranges from dominance in discourse to psychological and physical violence, women who do not engage in politeness strategies in any particular instance are often aware that they may be opening possibilities for experiencing a range of harms. Intimidation by men's dominance strategies might push women into adopting negative face strategies in the hopes of not threatening men's face wants in conversation. Intimidation might also explain why women's politeness tends towards deference. In either case, it would not seem unusual if women's attention to power relations in discourse were an important part of women's politeness strategies so as to avoid possible harms and losses to the self.

V. Conclusion

My account has aimed to bring to light the oppressive nature of gendered politeness strategies. While women's politeness strategies are often oriented toward positive face, reflected in involvement strategies, in conversations with men the research reveals that women favour negative face. This response appears to be a result of men's conversational dominance strategies because those strategies force a subordinate status onto women. A

women's typical response of negative politeness only serves to illustrate her deferential position, for its focus is on the needs of the other rather than oneself. Through demonstrating deference, women's negative politeness in mixed conversation is a form of powerless language. We should understand this account as limited in its claims about women. The research on power in mixed discourse focuses very little on different determinants of power, such as age, race, class, sexuality, religion, or socio-economic status. It would be interesting to see if women's ranking in any of these other cases are similarly subject to male dominated discourse or if there are differences in the oppression different *kinds* of women might experience in dialogue with men.

In closing, I offer the following suggestion in the hopes that it might further a discussion of how women might approach politeness so as to preserve self-respect and autonomy. I suggest that a certain selectivity is essential to avoiding the above sorts of harms to the self implicit to women in conversational communities. What I call *politeness selectivity* is a process of deciding when it is best or best not to engage in politeness strategies. Politeness selectivity may rely on two different sorts of strategies, each relevant to one's dialogical community. Here I distinguish two sorts of dialogical communities, which I describe as *communities of negotiation* and *communities of separation* (Burrow 2005).

Communities of negotiation feature dominance discourse aimed at establishing the superiority-subordinate ranking of its interlocutors. In these communities, oppressed persons are willing to negotiate their positions under complex contexts of domination. Entering mixed dialogues places women in communities of negotiation, wherein women must negotiate within the oppressive double bind implicit to their politeness strategies.

Separating to women's conversational communities fosters respect encouraging dialogue aimed at preserving equality between persons. In separatist communities, collaborative communication flourishes if interlocutors respect persons as the persons they are, reflected in attention and involvement with particular other persons and their wants and needs. Here, politeness strategies demonstrate equality. In these communities, politeness strategies encourage cooperation, trust, and goodwill between particular persons. These strategies facilitate the maintenance and development of both respect and autonomy. Thus, women compromised by oppression within mixed-gender conversations may do well to selectively decide when to enter communities of negotiation and when to retreat to communities of separation.

References

AVAW (2002), "Assessing Violence Against Women: A Statistical Profile," Federal-Provincial_Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women. Accessed October 10, 2004, <http://www.swcfc.gc.ca/pubs/0662331664/ 200212_0662331664_e.pdf>.

Brown, P. and S. Levinson (1987), *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Burrow, S. (2005) "The Political Structure of Emotion: From Dismissal to Dialogue," *Hypatia* 20.4: 27-43.

Cameron, Deborah. (1997), "Performing Gender Identity: young men's talk and the construction of heterosexual masculinity," in S. Johnson and U. Meinhof, eds., *Language and Masculinity*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Christie, C. (2000) *Gender and Language*, Edinburgh University, Edinburgh.

Coates, Jennifer (2004), *Women, Men and Language*, 3d ed., Pearson, Toronto.

---- . (1986) *Women, Men and Language*. New York: Longman.

Crawford, Mary (1995), *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language*, Sage Publications, London.

Dolinina, I., and V. Cecchetto (1998) "Facework and Rhetorical Strategies in Intercultural Argumentative Discourse," *Argumentation: An International Journal on Reasoning* 12.2: 167-81.

Heise, L. (1998), "Violence Against Women: And integrated, ecological framework," *Violence Against Women* 4.3: 262-290.

Holmes, Janet (1995), *Women, Men, and Politeness*, Longman, London.

Scollon, Ron and Suzanne Scollon (1995), *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach,* Blackwell, Oxford.

Vogelman, L. and G. Eagle (1991), "Overcoming Endemic Violence Against Women," *Social Justice*, 1.1: 209-229.

World Health Organization (2002), *World Report on Violence and Health*, Geneva.

Woods, Nicola (1989), "Talking shop: sex and status as determinants of floor apportionment in a work setting," in Coates, J. and Cameron, D. eds., *Reinventing Identities: The Gendered Self in Discourse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.