

Politeness in oral interviews of the “Progetto di Pavia” database¹

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1 Introduction

It is important to investigate politeness patterns in interlanguage pragmatics, since many intercultural misunderstandings stem from the fact that speakers of different languages attribute different values to the same situation and thus, a non-native speaker may seem “rude”, “impolite” by transferring an expression that would be suitable in his/her L1 (Nuzzo & Rastelli, 2009).

Nuzzo and Rastelli (2009) bring the example of a Uruguayan Spanish learner of Italian L2. In Uruguayan Spanish, requests can be made with the form *quiero* (‘I want’) without being impolite. If a learner transfers this form in Italian and says *voglio* (‘I want’) in the same situation, instead of *vorrei* (‘I would like to’ – literally ‘I would want’), he/she does not fit Italian politeness forms. What is interesting that learners seem to prefer such “impolite” forms even if they know the formation of the Italian conditional paradigm. Here the issue becomes a clearly pragmalinguistic one (Blum-Kulka & Kasper, 1993).

This paper investigates the phenomenon of politeness on a corpus of transcription of Italian L2 oral interviews. My aim is to provide insight into a stage of acquisition of politeness in Italian interlanguages with data taken from learners who mostly acquired Italian spontaneously, without much formal instruction. Further evidence will be shown by reviewing previous literature about experimental test designs focusing on purposefully elicited data regarding politeness. Furthermore, we will see how do native

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interlocutors use politeness devices to mitigate their utterances, since native/non-native interactions often show politeness patterns with unique traits.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 the term *politeness* is explained with the help of different politeness theories elaborated in the field of pragmatics. I put a particular emphasis on two very influential politeness theories, Leech's (1983) and Brown & Levinson's (1987) work.

Section 3 deals with the investigation of politeness in SLA research. Departing from the wider context of interlanguage pragmatics, I will show how researchers tried to explain the importance and the acquisition patterns of politeness in L2. Since in the subsequent sections Italian L2 data will be presented, my examples will be from Italian L2 pragmatics research. In a subsection the role of the native interlocutor and their relationship with the participant are presented in oral data collection procedures.

In Section 4, I present the corpus that serves as a basis for my investigations: the database of the Progetto di Pavia. We will find information about the participants and the data collection methods. This section also contains a brief data analysis based on the corpus of Pavia with some preliminary results and discussion (Section 4.2). The conclusion drawn from the investigation of data is in Section 5. Due to the low number of participants, such a conclusion cannot be a representative one, thus this work has an exploratory nature.

2 Politeness theories in pragmatics

Politeness is one of the central issues in pragmatic research, we can even say that for many authors the study of politeness is equivalent to pragmatics (Szili, 2007). Szili (2007) contrasts different definitions of pragmatics that emphasize the importance of social distance and that try to answer the question of what can be said in different social

relations. She adds that such a “politeness-centered” view of pragmatics is probably due to the influence Leech (1983) and Brown & Levinson (1987) had on the field. We continue with a brief overview of these two theories.

2.1 Leech’s politeness theory

Leech in his *Principles of pragmatics* (1983) adopts the Gricean concept of maxims that are aimed at making communication more effective. However, he goes further, postulating another principle apart from Grice’s Cooperative Principle, namely the Politeness Principle, which at the same time must not be seen “as another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary complement, which rescues the CP from serious trouble” (Leech, 1983, 80). That is, in order not to seem impolite, we can disregard the cooperative maxims and act in terms of the Politeness Principle.

The Politeness Principle includes six maxims: Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement, and Sympathy. Some of these maxims form pairs and can be placed at the two edges of a continuum, such as Tact and Generosity (along the cost-benefit continuum of *self* and *other*) or Approbation and Modesty (along the praise-dispraise continuum). The two remaining maxims represent unipolar scales: level of agreement and sympathy between *self* and *other*.

2.2 Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory

Brown and Levinson in their *Politeness: Some universals in language use* (1987) depart from a different perspective. They adapt the Goffmanian concept of ‘face’ and reduce it into two basic notions: our *positive face* needs to be acknowledged by others, to be part of a group, whereas the *negative face* indicates the need to be independent, not

to be imposed by others. In everyday communication, people tend to respect each other's face wants.

We often need to perform acts that contradict others' face wants. Brown & Levinson call these actions Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). Such acts can affect either the H(earer) or the S(peaker). The function of politeness strategies is to avoid direct performance of FTAs (even if sometimes it is necessary to pronounce them "bald on record"): *positive politeness* strategies emphasize a (presumed) cooperation, common goal between S and H, while *negative politeness* strategies try to minimize the threat represented by the FTA. There are two more strategies: we can perform an FTA indirectly, going *off record*, or we can choose not to perform it at all. Fundamentally, in both cases we leave to the H the interpretation of our verbal/non-verbal clues.

2.3 Cross-cultural politeness

Both authors mentioned in the previous sections emphasize the importance of cross-cultural comparisons of politeness strategies, since there is a variety of politeness concepts across different cultures. Szili (2009) reviews opinions opposing both theories: in Leech it is not clear why are exactly those maxims and not others to be stressed, thus the pragmalinguistic aspect of politeness can be projected with difficulty into different cultures. Critics of Brown and Levinson emphasize their Western concept of face, which thus interprets other cultures based on an extraneous model.

A large-scale project, called the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), under the direction of Shoshana Blum-Kulka (see e.g. Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984) investigated cross-cultural patterns of requests and apologies. Requests and apologies are *per definitionem* FTAs, thus in their expression diverse strategies can be used according to their levels of directness. These strategies come with

morphosyntactic and lexical-functional mitigation devices; the use of such devices varies from one language to another, thus the CCSARP coding system (based on the strategies mentioned above) offers a useful device to make cross-linguistical, cross-cultural comparisons. However, to draw such conclusions we have to depart from the overly simplified and idealised view that language is equivalent to culture.

The idea of the CCSARP project and the classification of mitigation devices has been a very fruitful one: in the following section I will present some of its implementations in Italian L2 acquisition research with awareness of the idealisation stated above.

3 Politeness as an issue in research of Italian as a L2

3.1 Use of politeness devices in Italian L2

Nuzzo and Rastelli (2009) examine the question of politeness in the perspective of applied SLA research (*didattica acquisizionale*). The main aim of this field is to investigate how to apply the findings of SLA research in methodology. Its claim is that one has to implement sequences of spontaneous language acquisition into course syllabuses. Nuzzo and Rastelli focus on difficulties that spontaneous learners of Italian have to face: the allocutionary system (the *tu/Lei* distinction) and the necessity of mitigating devices in order to avoid bald on record FTAs may cause serious problems for Italian L2 speakers, making them less effective in everyday situations in the target country. They conclude that pragmatic features need to be taught at the very beginning of formal instruction in Italian, since foreigners living in Italy often receive a simplified input from native speakers; this impedes the acquisition of many pragmalinguistic features of Italian.

The same conclusion can be drawn from Gauci's (2015) study where she investigates internal mitigating modifiers in written and oral productions of Maltese students

learning Italian at an intermediate level. She finds that the experimental groups used more modifiers at a post-test than the control group that has not received either explicit or implicit pragmatic instruction during the time frame of the experiment. However, the use of modifiers is different from that of native speakers: while native Italian speakers showed a preference for syntactic modifiers, such as the conditional, non-native speakers had a tendency to use lexical modifiers, above all *per favore* 'please'. Gauci concludes that there is a need for a more authentic, more subtle teaching of pragmatics, involving social factors as well.

Vedder examines the question of the acquisition of politeness from a somewhat different perspective. In her study (Vedder, 2007), she investigates correlation patterns between overall language proficiency on Italian L2 (measured by a cloze test) and the use of internal and external modifiers in requests elicited in a role-play task taken by a group of Dutch university students. In her taxonomy, an internal modifier is used in the principal act, while external modifiers appear outside it. Examples of internal modifiers are conditional forms (*mi daresti...?* 'could you give me...') or lexical downtoners like *forse* 'perhaps'. On the other hand, addressing terms (*sentì,...* 'listen...') or warrants (*Mi presti la bici per stasera? Domani te la riporto.* 'Do you borrow me your bicycle for tonight? I'll return it tomorrow') are examples of external modifiers.

Vedder has found significant correlation only between the use of internal morphosyntactic modifiers and language proficiency. In her results there is a preference of morphosyntactic modifiers over lexical ones. What is interesting compared to Gauci's (2015) results is that she finds no difference between the frequency of use of internal and external modifiers. In her explanation, this is due to the lower-intermediate level of Italian in her group. A drawback of her findings, as reported also by herself, is that she takes into consideration only quantitative, statistical data analysis of the

frequency of certain forms, with almost no regard to the qualitative investigation of *which* forms emerge at the level of her group.

3.2 Native/non-native speaker interactions

The preceding subsection has dealt with pragmatic features of Italian interlanguage as a system of its own, with no regard to interaction with native speakers. It is however important to report on this topic as well, since in the empirical data to be shown in the following section we will see native/non-native speaker interactions.

Many authors observed that there is an asymmetric relationship between native and non-native speakers. Learners, as Harder (1980) claims, have a *reduced personality*: they need to avoid topics for which they lack adequate vocabulary and they cannot properly use politeness patterns in the target language. (For other, wider reasons of such an asymmetric relationship in native/non-native interactions see e.g. Orletti's (2001) study.) Reviewing previous literature, Harder finds five factors underlying the asymmetry: non-native speakers often have a different occupational status (immigrants occupy lower-level jobs); they lack adequate knowledge of the host country's language; they are often involved in contexts where the native speaker represents "power" (e.g. factories, bureaus); exchanges sometimes have a charitable aim; non-native speakers are often involved in an interview-like speech event, with them answering to the native speaker's questions.

Orletti shows in her case study in interactions between an Italian native speaker and an Eritrean speaker of Italian L2 that asymmetrical speaker roles can be attributable to the nature of the speech event, and that the non-native status of a speaker is not always relevant in the contextualization of their identity.

However, we have to mention that the findings of Orletti's (2001) study cannot be generalized. Her Eritrean participant had been living in Italy for 17 years at the time of the interviews, and they were close friends with the native interlocutor. This can account for their symmetrical relation in the interactions. Thus, the case is somewhat different from large-scale oral interviews involving multiple participants, like the Progetto di Pavia in Italy.

4 Politeness in the data of the Progetto di Pavia

The Progetto di Pavia was the first large-scale, systematic investigation on the interlanguages of immigrants working and living in Italy (Chini, 2005). It began in the 1980's under the direction of Anna Giacalone Ramat. The main aim of the project was to explore sequences in the acquisition of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic features of Italian, by examining oral data collected from participants, i.e., immigrants resident in Italy, in the region of Lombardy, with a variety of L1s.

One remark must be made regarding "pragmatic features". In the perspective of the Pavia group, the acquisition of pragmatics consists mainly of research questions such as word order patterns connected to *topic-comment* structure, placement and marking of focus elements. The use of the term is due to Givón's (1979) distinction between the topic-comment based, context-dependent *pragmatic mode* and the grammar-governed *syntactic mode*. Other questions regarding pragmatics, such as discourse structure, native/non-native interaction, speech act realization, emerge in the 2000's, after the completion of the Progetto di Pavia (Giacalone Ramat, Chini, & Andorno, 2013).

4.1 Participants and data collection methods in the Progetto di Pavia

Information about participants and data collection methods are summed up based on Andorno & Bernini (2003). The Progetto di Pavia involved speakers of Italian L2 with a variety of L1s and countries of origin. All the participants were residents in Italy (with or without a residence permit). Apart from their L1s, participants also varied in age (with a majority of learners between 20-30 years of age), in profession, in formal instruction prior to their arrival in Italy, and in the number of years spent in Italy at the beginning of the oral interviews. From a wide range of learners involved in the project, 20 participants were chosen, their fully transcribed oral data forms the base of the corpus of Pavia. This corpus (with data from additional two learners) is published in a CD-ROM (Andorno, 2001).

The tasks entailed various oral activities. The most common is the oral interview, with the participant having a semi-structured conversation with an Italian native speaker (often a member of the research group). Topics included everyday life, cultural differences between Italy and participants' countries of origin, leisure activities, relations with compatriots and Italians. Other tasks included role-plays with the Italian interlocutor or with another learner, description of pictures, narration of stories based on cartoons.

4.2 Politeness patterns in the database

From the database of the Progetto di Pavia, I chose three participants, their data will serve the purpose of presentation of politeness strategies. My intention was to choose participants with different countries of origin, age and formal instruction. What is the same in all of the three participants is their level of language proficiency, labelled by the researchers "postbasico +". This terminology is based on Klein and Perdue's (1993) notion of the development beyond the *basic variety* and thus a *post-basic* level implies

frequent (however, often erroneous) use of morphological markers, finite verbs and subordinate phrases.

In the present study, the first conversation of each participant with their Italian interlocutor was analyzed. Given the introductory nature of the paper, these data will be enough to give an insight into tendencies regarding politeness. The comparison is supported by the fact that the topic is the same in all of the three interviews: questions regarding the participant's biography and everyday life.

There is an important factor that makes the participants' oral productions less comparable. Namely, each participant took part in the interviews with a different interlocutor. Thus, we have three pairs with no common member to connect them, three isolated cases with unique kinds of interaction between members. If we had had the same interlocutor for our three participants, then the differences between the pragmatic features of the interviews could have been attributed to their dissimilar conversational styles. In our case, however, there is an additional variable: the interlocutors' conversational style.

Our three participants are Weizheng (WE), Matthias (MA) and Ababa (AB). Their biographical data is shown in the following table.

Name	Sex	Age	L1	Profession	Prior instruction	L2 acquisition
Weizheng	Male	38	Mandarin Chinese	cook; formerly technician	12 years of school in China	mainly spontaneous; attending a language course
Matthias	Male	22	German	doorman; (assistant architect)	secondary school, 2 years of university in Germany	language courses even before the arrival in Italy
Ababa	Female	21	Tigrinya	charwoman	secondary school studies in	mainly spontaneous; attending a

					Eritrea	language course
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In the following sub-sections I will provide some examples of learner and interlocutor data and try to explain certain recurring patterns with the help of Brown & Levinson's (1987) theory. It is important to outline before the analyses that these examples show only tendencies, that is, no quantitative measurements took place.

4.2.1 Characteristic patterns in learners' utterances

In agreement with the findings mentioned in 3.1, learners often lack the appropriate devices to express politeness in Italian. Given this fact and the formal, non-spontaneous nature of interviewing, the three participants are involved many times in situations where they have to face their own linguistic deficits.

A recurring pattern in the transcripts is the following: the learner cannot finish an utterance because lacks an appropriate word or grammatical form. Thus, he/she asks for help. The interlocutor provides the correct form, which is repeated by the learner. This pattern occurs seven times in MA and three times in AB. (1) and (2) show, respectively, two examples from their interviews:

- | | | |
|-----|---|---|
| (1) | \MA\ eh ++ non ho pensato, perché- +
ho avuto un po' di paura di di essere- + di essere-
++ *enttäuscht* &%?come si dice?%& ²
\IT\ &deluso&
\MA\ deluso si | <i>eh, I didn't think, because
I was a bit afraid of being... of being
'enttäuscht'. How do you say?
Disappointed.
Yes, disappointed.</i> |
| (2) | \AB\ hanno do-/siamo arriva/siete arrivati
non lo so:^ -
\IT\ sono arrivati
\AB\ sono arrivati i polsiotti | <i>they have/we have/you have arrived
I don't know.
(They) have arrived
The policemen have arrived.</i> |

² Transcripts are presented according to the conventions of the Progetto di Pavia.

As we can see, learners can ask for both lexical (1) or morphological help (2). The admission of being unable to express oneself carries a FTA damaging S's positive face. S can go off record instead of asking, just saying *non lo so* 'I don't know', and MA often uses an interrogative intonation to give a hint. Another possibility is asking collaboration bald on record with *come si dice?* 'How do you say?'

The interlocutor, by providing the correct answer, shows that he notices the learner's needs, who, in turn, confirms that he has understood the help. Both actions can be considered to respect positive face.

Another topic relating to linguistic deficit is when the learner threatens his/her own face by expressing verbally his/her difficulties. One example is shown in (3):

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (3) | \AB\ +++ non lo so
non posso: - pe(r)che (dif)ficile per me | <i>I don't know</i>
<i>I can't [tell you], it's difficult to me</i> |
|-----|--|--|

This kind of metalinguistic observations is often made by MA who, by having had more formal instruction in Italian, is more aware (and disturbed) by the errors he makes.

We can rarely observe other politeness strategies in learners' utterances. An important positive politeness strategy is joking: MA, for example, often makes funny remarks, but also the others use laughter as a connecting link.

4.2.2 *Patterns in interlocutors' utterances*

As seen in Section 2.3 and 3.1, requests, being intrinsically FTAs, form the basis of many interlanguage politeness research projects. In the three oral interviews examined by me, native interlocutors make many requests. As normally seen in research concerning *foreigner talk*, interlocutors tend to be oversimplistic and direct in asking

(cf. Ellis, 1994). Thus, instead of more complicated morphosyntactic mitigators, they use imperatives (4) or indicative present (5) as requests.

- | | | |
|-----|---|--|
| (4) | raccontami un po' come e stato,
anche il viaggio- quando sei arrivato qui- | <i>tell me a bit how was it
even traveling – when you arrived here</i> |
| (5) | allora ci raccon/mi/mi racconti
qualcosa di Radici | <i>then you tell us/me
something about Roots</i> |

This phenomenon may seem a FTA bald on record; however, this is not the case, this direct use serves better comprehension, thus it counts as an act which facilitates collaboration.

Interlocutors often appeal to the use of attenuating forms (6a-b) and request agreement (7a-b) in order to encourage the participants. These are, again, cases of positive politeness.

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (6) | a. oppure un pezzettino
della storia del giallo?

b. magari l'ultimo che hai visto | <i>or [do you tell me] a tiny bit
of the detective story?

perhaps the last one you saw</i> |
| (7) | a. questa gente adesso abita in America, vero?

b. e invece il/:la cultura: mh originaria,
quella - di cui parla anche il libro
è dell'Africa, + giusto? | <i>they are living now in America, aren't they?

but the original culture
that – about which the book is
is from Africa, am I right?</i> |

It is interesting that examples like (6-7) characterize mainly the speech of AB's interlocutor. His other interesting trait is the use of embedded requests. This kind of request can express negative politeness: it is up to the hearer whether he/she wants to act. An example is shown in (8).

forms, one must be exposed to authentic input, either in the target country, or by a vast amount of authentic learning materials.

In the second part of the paper, I outlined a brief analysis of oral interviews taken by researchers of the Progetto di Pavia in Italy. The interviews presented necessarily do not represent spontaneous speech data: they are elicited oral productions. Thus, speech acts investigated in most researches reviewed (requests, apologies) do not emerge in the data in a necessary and satisfactory amount.

The conclusions we can draw from the oral data presented in Section 4 is that politeness devices are not yet disponibile at a post-basic level. This can be attributed to various reasons, from limited input (*foreigner talk*, interactions with compatriots), to limited linguistic awareness and the unfavorable social situation many non-native speakers have to face in the target country. What is important to stress is that the use of pragmatic devices does have an effect on efficiency in a L2: even if a post-basic level is enough to make oneself understood, politeness can help learners to be more accepted by native speakers as partners.

On the other hand, in the majority of the data presented above, we saw instances of politeness forms used by native interlocutors. Native speakers are not impeded linguistically, thus they can choose from many kinds of mitigation devices. According to the principles of *foreigner talk*, for native speakers the efficacy of native/non-native interactions requires the choice of more simple politeness forms. These forms could seem less polite in native/native interactions because of their straightforwardness. However, in this case we must keep in consideration the nature of such interactions: native interlocutors may tend to choose forms that are different from those that they would use with other native speakers, since the need to make themselves understood by an L2 speaker is more important than the mitigation of a possible FTA.

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