



Podcast #: Politeness

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Host: Julia

Guests: Seung-Woo and Masato

Description: Host Julia invites graduate students Seung-Woo and Masato to discuss their experience and knowledge of how the smallest changes in word choice can have a big impact on politeness around the world.

Transcript:

Julia

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Linguistics . . .

Seung-Woo

Go! Go!

Julia

I'm Julia and I study linguistics. I'm going to be the host of the show today. And today I'm with Masato and Seung-Woo. Masato, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Masato

Hi, *Kon'nichiwa*. My name is Masato and I'm from Japan. And I'm interested in politeness, just in general. Nice to meet you.

Seung-Woo

Nice to meet you.

Julia

And Seung-Woo?

Seung-Woo

Annyeonghaseyo. Hi, my name is Seung-Woo. I am also a fellow graduate student at OU. And it's an honor to talk about politeness with you guys today.

Julia

Alright, as was previewed, today our topic is going to be politeness. And first of all, both of you are graduate students in linguistics, but before you studied linguistics, what was your general idea of politeness?

Seung-Woo

Just being deferential to authority figure, like my father, being polite to people.

Masato

It's a bit hard to answer, but I thought if we hedge like a lot, I just thought we can be simply polite. For example, like if I say like, "I'm afraid to ask, but would you mind *duh duh duh*?" And I thought that that could be like really polite.

Seung-Woo

Mostly manners.

Julia

Yeah. And Masato just pointed out something interesting. So hedging is making your language kind of softer. So like, if you have a question, you just kind of ask it in a more roundabout, less direct way. And I think my first experience with politeness was my mother, actually. Because me and my sisters were so badly behaved, she created a politeness class for us all to take after school. And we learned a lot of--we learned, "please," "thank you," and also "pardon me," which is sort of strange.

Seung-Woo

Pardon me?

Julia

Yeah, pardon me? Yeah. And that kind of brings us to our next question. Because politeness is oftentimes strongly tied to language. And both of you are linguistics students now. And how has your perception of politeness changed? What does politeness mean in a linguistics sense?

Seung-Woo

Well, in linguistics, politeness indicates language use when you're speaking, speech acts that are used to avoid or alleviate situations that are difficult.

Julia

What do you mean by a speech act?

Seung-Woo

Speech act?

Julia

Yeah, a speech act.

Seung-Woo

Speech act is all the languages you use when you're interacting with other people.

Julia

I see. I see. Okay.

Seung-Woo

And by "difficult situation," I'm talking about face threatening acts, or FTAs, which are, which could be situations where the other person might be damaged, in terms of public image. Oh, that's not very good. Oh, my gosh.

Julia

Avoiding embarrassment?

Seung-Woo

Yes, yes.

Julia

Do you have anything to say about . . . ?

Masato

Oh yeah. Like I said, I previously thought that the more we hedge, the more polite we can be. But linguistically--in linguistics--politeness depends on context. For example, when I talk to my professor, it's alright or it's okay to say, "Would you mind?" But when I talk to my sister, or my family, if I say, "I'm afraid to ask" or "Would you mind *duh duh duh*?" it can be sarcastic. So I think politeness, linguistically, politeness really depends on the context.

Julia

That's so interesting. And that actually brings me to my next question. So I spent about five years living in Japan. And I think in America, I'm considered a very polite person, to an extent. I mean, I tend to be less direct, I think, than a lot of Americans. And when I got to Japan, I had to relearn how to be polite in Japanese society and I offended people all the time accidentally. It was a complete identity crisis for me. So, Seung-Woo you're from Korea? Right? And Masato you're from Japan? How do you think politeness is different in your culture versus American culture, where you are now? Masato, do you want to start?

Masato

I think in America, I tend to be like, or I try to be more straightforward when I have to give answers. For example, when some people offer me food, and I have to refuse their request, I tend to be more straightforward in English. But in Japanese culture, we have to be indirect. When we refuse a request, like, "Um, I think I'm okay." And American people would tend to be confused about my answer. So I try to be really direct or straightforward. "Oh, no, I'm okay." Yep.

Julia

What about in Korea?

Seung-Woo

I think for Korean . . . Well, in Korea, there are different ways of addressing same terms. Like even for food, I'll just say something to--like when I say "let's have dinner," I'll say it differently to an elderly or my father or my grandma than if I would say it to my brother, younger brother. So that just means there are linguistic aspects tied to Korean culture, I guess, Korean language that signifies who the listener is just by listening to how they speak.

Masato

Yes, same in Japanese. We have so many different ways to say like "dinner," for example. And we use them like differently according or based on a situation. Yeah.

Julia

And I think this is one of the biggest challenges that Americans have in terms of politeness when they go to Japan and possibly when they go to Korea as well. Because you actually--you kind of have to learn separate languages depending on who you're speaking to because there's a ranking system. I think you mentioned the way that you would refer to someone is going to be different like if they're older or younger?

Seung-Woo

Yeah, there's honorific system as well.

Julia

So what's that called in Japan? Is it *keigo*? Or?

Masato

Oh yeah. *Keigo*. Yeah. Honorifics system.

Julia

All right. So, when I was in Japan, *keigo* was really challenging for me. And one of the reasons was because that in America, you kind of read the room, in terms of how polite you should be. So if you go to your first day of work and your boss is really casual with you, it's probably a good sign that you can use his first name and be casual. But when I first got to Japan, my boss was really casual to me because I was very low ranking, I had no seniority, and I was a foreigner. And I was casual back to him. Because they thought we were cool. And this was really embarrassing. This got me in a lot of trouble. So I was wondering for each of you . . . this is an example of when I was accidentally really impolite. So have you ever had that experience? How long have you been in America now?

Seung-Woo

A year and a half?

Masato

I've been here for about like, two years. Two years?

Seung-Woo

I mean, I don't think I've ever been accidentally impolite. I would, I think I was more accidentally over-polite. Because when I address somebody older than I am, in Korea, you always use more polite linguistic form. So for example, I met my girlfriend's father. And I could never call him by his first name; I would always use "Mr. Rigby" or "sir" other than their first name. That might come off as me being a bit reserved, but it's just--I'm not like shy about it--it's just that I'm more comfortable speaking that way. And it's familiar to me. So yeah.

Masato

I think I've been accidentally impolite to my American friends, because in Japanese, it's okay to be really direct or straightforward when we're making a request. But I've learned that American people use modals a lot when making a request, even when they talk to their friends, like close friends. So I've been accidentally impolite to my American friends when I made a request.

Julia

Yeah. So saying like, "Pass me the chips" rather than "Can you please pass me the chips?"

Masato

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Julia

So the last thing I wanted to talk about, since we've talked about differences of politeness in our different cultures, is this concept of linguistic transfer. And this is something that is usually thought about in terms of like grammar transfer or pronunciation transfer. So if you have a concept in your language and it's very different than the concept in the second language you're studying, it might be harder for you to learn because of that difference. And we've talked about this in terms of grammar, but we've also been talking about this in terms of politeness a lot this semester. So do you guys have any thoughts on . . . I think we oftentimes refer to this as pragmatic transfer?

Masato

Yeah, I think their pragmatic knowledge like politeness, transfers when people interact with others in the L-2 or L-3. For example, in my culture, when we refuse a request, we tend to put like a negative marker at the beginning, like "I'm sorry," or "I apologize," or "I'm afraid." And when I make a refuse or request in English, I always try to, I always tend to put those markers at the beginning, like "I'm sorry to say this, but I apologize." Something like that. But I've learned that in English or L-1 English speakers tend to put like a positive marker. For example, like, "Oh, that sounds lovely. But *something something*." So this is definitely evidence of pragmatic transfer. Yeah.

Julia

So interesting. I never even thought of that.

Seung-Woo

I mean, yeah, like Masato said, I think pragmatic transfer does occur because it's inevitable for us to learn another language without the knowledge that we already have in our mother tongue. And that's closely related to culture and how we use language. So like Masato said, if there is a negative marker in Japanese, for instance, it will be difficult not to use negative marker once you learn how to refuse something in English as well. So yeah, that's a good example. Yeah.

Julia

So we were really interested in this question. And we have a cohort that comes from multiple different linguistics backgrounds. So we have a couple of Mandarin speakers, a few Arabic speakers, a Spanish speaker, and we wanted to actually ask them a question and see how they would respond differently for this scenario. So Seung-woo, do you want to introduce the scenario that you asked and we can talk about some of the different responses that we got?

Seung-Woo

So yes, this is the scenario that we asked and if you're listening, you can think about it yourself as well. So it is raining heavily outside and you have to borrow an umbrella to walk home. Look around the building and find no spare umbrella. But you do find one person with two umbrellas. So how will you ask them to lend you an umbrella? And that one person is (one) your best friend, or (two) a friendly TA, and (three) your scary linguistics professor.

Julia

Okay. And I think I know my answer, but I wanted to ask you. So we have your best friend, your TA, and your scary linguistics professor. So how are these scenarios different in terms of linguistics?

Seung-Woo

According to Brown and Levinson who are like the very famous dynamic duo of politeness strategies, there are three things that determine the seriousness of their face threatening act, FTA. I'm sorry to keep mentioning the linguistic jargon. So it's basically how serious the request is. And one is social distance, how emotionally close you are with the other person. So if you're like best friends, it'll be easier to ask a question or request something, right? Second is relative power. So if the listener is of higher rank, higher position than you are, it'll be wise to ask something indirectly than more directly. And third is the rating of imposition, which basically means how serious the request is. Is it asking for time? Or is it asking for \$100 or something?

Julia

Yeah. So in this case, since they have two umbrellas, we're mostly thinking about closeness and then like the power. Because a professor is going to have power above you.

Seung-Woo

Exactly, yeah.

Julia

Alright, so we'll talk about a few of . . . some of you who are listening might speak a certain language and I want you to think about what your answer to this would be, how you would ask for the umbrella. And we just wanted to look at some of the trends we saw. And first of all, with Mandarin speakers. What did we see for Mandarin speakers?

Seung-Woo

I mean, according to the chart that we have here, it seems like, well, Mandarin has actual--like Korean or Japanese--they have a way to use certain terminologies for people who are older

than us or who needs respect. So we can see that for a friend, it's casual, and then TA, a little more polite. And then for professor, it's the politest, the most polite.

Julia

Masato, did you find any of these results interesting or did you feel like any of these people kind of lined up with you?

Masato

I think I found it really interesting to see like, for account people, regardless of one's status, they use like somewhat like direct forms, like request forms, like "give me an umbrella." Something like that regardless of what one's status, so I think it's really interesting.

Seung-Woo

Speaking of can not code words.

Julia

And we also had one Arabic speaker say she will never ask for an umbrella and her actual given reason was she's too proud to ask for an umbrella. So I found this really interesting. And with the other results, I thought, we saw a really interesting trend with the Americans actually. So out of--we have five Americans who are English speakers in the class, and out of the five, four of them said they will not ask.

Masato

They will prefer to be wet.

Julia

Than embarrass themselves for a professor and I wouldn't ask. Would you guys ask? Do you think you would ask?

Seung-Woo

I don't think I'll ask a professor to . . .

Masato

I don't think I could.

Seung-Woo

I'll just ask my best friend. Or I actually, I'll just enjoy walking in the rain.

Julia

How would you ask your best friend?

Seung-Woo

Like, if he has two umbrellas like I can share an umbrella with him and give the other to a beautiful girl or something.

Julia

That's a really romantic scenario. So what did you guys think about this with the Americans are actually really kind of avoiding any, for any kind of conflict like Seung-Woo said, face threatening act. So what did you think of this?

Seung-Woo

I think this is, I don't know like, why we got this result, for sure. But I think this is kind of related to how we asked the question. This is not linguistic related. But I asked them specifically like, how would you ask to lend an umbrella, right? And I asked them, how would you politely ask them, the other person, to borrow an umbrella? And so for other students, I think that kind of was understood as I need to give an accurate, polite form, to ask a question. But for Americans, I think they were really like trying to think in their own shoes about the situation and gave an honest answer. Because this might be the

Julia

Might be the education.

Seung-Woo

Yeah. Maybe they're asked to express themselves truthfully. In other cultures, I would definitely if I was given this question, I would try to write the most polite form to ask a professor, even though I wouldn't ask.

Masato

I would do the same thing. Yeah.

Seung-Woo

We have to find the correct answer.

Julia

A few of the Americans actually just refused to answer and said they like the rain. So I thought that was quite interesting. Again, it could be the speaker, not the language. So this is quite

small. We had, you know, just what 15 people in the class in total that we were talking about this with? But it's interesting to start thinking about, you know, who you are in your first language, who you are in your second language and the way that you express yourself. And it does matter because that, you know, people form impressions. I think a lot of people thought I was rude and hopefully that that's not true when I was in Japan.

Masato

You're very polite.

Julia

And do you have either of you have any final thoughts on this topic?

Seung-Woo

I'm so sorry to make it so difficult to understand by adding linguistic jargons I didn't mean to. And speech act. Let me go back. Speech act is an utterance. Oh my God, this is so difficult as well.

Julia

Study linguistics guys.

Seung-Woo

Okay. Speech act is an utterance defined in terms of a speaker's intention and the effect it has on a listener. So I was kind of right. It's an interaction and how you want to, like, express yourself.

Julia

Yeah. And you can tell that these books were written by linguists who are not so good at expressing themselves to normal people. All of the terms are like this.

Seung-Woo

I wonder if Chomsky is a polite person?

Julia

That's a good question. He's really hard to read, though.

Seung-Woo

Next week.

Julia

Masato, do you have any final thoughts about the topic?

Masato

Oh, yeah. I really enjoyed this talk. And I was happy to share like the notion of politeness in my culture. Thank you so much for this time.

Seung-Woo

Thank you for waking up.

Masato

I'm so sorry. I think I put too many negative markers. I'm so sorry.

Julia

So that's going to bring us to a close for today's talk in linguistics. And next week, we'll talk about possibly politeness and movies. That's something that we're interested in looking at, especially in looking at the power dynamics.

Seung-Woo

We're gonna talk about characters in *Breaking Bad*.

Julia

And if anyone has any requests, please let us know.

Seung-Woo

And you can call us at--

Julia

Don't give them my number!