

Expressing Politeness in English and Romanian – Some Grammatical and Pragmatic Aspects

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Abstract

The English and Romanian languages are quite different, with dissimilar historical backgrounds and with no genetic relatedness. Yet, as far as linguistic politeness is concerned, we may encounter a number of similarities between the two languages. Our survey will highlight the fact that, even if the resemblance between Romanian and English, from the grammatical point of view, is not so evident, yet, there are many similarities as far as the pragmatic view on politeness is concerned. We might speak of a certain constant when referring to the common characteristics of the two languages, of a common universal factor that characterizes the communicative competence of the people.

Keywords: *politeness, communication, grammar, pragmatics, similarities*

Although politeness is regarded by most linguists as a social phenomenon rather than a pragmatic one, the theories of politeness represent a widely debated topic in pragmatics. From the pragmatic point of view, the analysis of politeness is based on the study of speech acts in isolation, focusing on a particular speech act. On the other hand, as a social phenomenon, politeness is extensively analyzed, with an emphasis on the social interaction instances which are in progress.

In Romanian, there are different ways of expressing politeness through grammatical means: the pronoun system, the use of common and proper nouns in the vocative case, different verbal forms, various lexical means.

Among these, the pronominal address system related to expressing politeness is highly complex. As far as the concept of politeness is concerned, Romanians are making use of the negative politeness strategies in order to maintain power distance and to respect status

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difference. In Romanian, the personal pronoun of politeness has different forms for the 2nd and 3rd persons, each of them bearing various forms ranked by three speech levels. The 2nd person personal pronoun of politeness has three degrees of politeness: familiar speech: *tu* (in English *you*) – a personal pronoun which agrees with the verb in the 2nd person singular; medium politeness: *dumneata* – a personal pronoun which agrees with the verb in the 2nd person singular and maximum politeness: *dumneavoastră* – a personal pronoun which agrees with the verb in the 2nd person plural. Medium politeness is a distinctive feature of the Romanian language, which cannot be encountered in other languages. *Dumneata* may be used either in a formal context or, on the contrary, in an informal one. Moreover, the 2nd person personal pronoun of politeness has different forms for different cases (*dumneata/mata/matale* – for nominative and accusative cases and *dumitale* – for the genitive and the dative cases) and even diminutive forms (*mătălică, mătăluță, tălică*). This formal diversity of the personal pronoun of politeness is a proof of its history and importance for the Romanian language. Romanians' psycho-social and behavioral patterns make up a rich background which supports the form not only of the personal pronoun of politeness, but also of other forms used to express deference: noun + possessive adjective – *domnia ta, domnia voastră*. The 3rd person personal pronoun of politeness has also three degrees of politeness: familiar speech: *el/ea; ei/ele* (in English *he/she; they*) – personal pronouns which agree with the verb in the 3rd person singular or plural; medium politeness: *dânsul/dânsa; dânsii/dânsele* – personal pronouns which agree with the verb in the 3rd person singular or plural and maximum politeness: *dumnealui/dumneaei; dumnealor* – personal pronouns which agree with the verb in the 3rd person singular or plural. The forms used to express deference for the 3rd person singular and plural are: *domnia ei, domnia lui, domnia sa; domniile lor*. The unusual form expressing deference for the 1st person singular is used to express self-irony: *domnia mea*. As regards the personal pronoun *tu* (*you*), it is used in informal verbal exchanges, between interlocutors of the same social status. Generally speaking, we may say that the personal pronoun *tu* (=you) is the trigger of some kind of familiarity between the interlocutors, irrespective of the existence of other factors. We can illustrate this by the way young people use this pronoun when addressing the older ones (parents, grandparents etc.).

Regarding the use of the vocative case in expressing politeness, oral communication is dotted with a variety of forms in the vocative case, which is marked by specific endings. The vocative forms within the familiar way of addressing can be seen as a positive politeness strategy: *Ioana/loano/loană*. Common nouns used to express politeness are, in fact,



generic names, with a gender difference: *domnule* (=sir), *doamnă* (=madam), *domnișoară* (=miss). There is a frequent tendency to use a way of addressing in which the vocative form is identical with the nominative form, with a definite article, unaccompanied by the family name. The addressing formulas of the type *domnul/doamna* (=Mr./Mrs.) are often used to indicate deprecation of an interlocutor with a lower social status: *Atenție, domnule, să nu cumva să te împiedici!* (=Be careful, Mr., lest you should stumble!) The higher social status requires the usage of some appellations designating names of professions, positions or titles (*president, mayor, minister, doctor, engineer, professor etc.*). The agreement is made with the verb in the plural: *Domnule primar, ne puteti spune care este ordinea de zi?* (= Mr. Mayor, can you tell us what's on duty schedule?). The highest degree of politeness when addressing a person implies the use of a generic term for expressing politeness (of the type *doamnă/domnule* = Mr./Mrs.), mentioning the social status of the receiver and the surname. The agreement with the verb is made in the 2nd person plural. The combination of all these elements implies respect and a higher politeness degree. The utterance may also contain a personal pronoun of politeness of the 2nd person plural (*dumneavoastră*): *Domnule doctor Ionescu, (dumneavoastră) ați fost de gardă?* In English, the generic term is not used in this context. English does not have politeness pronouns and does not use the plural verbal forms in order to mark politeness, so a sentence like that cannot be translated exactly into English. A variant might be: *Doctor Ionescu, was it you who were on duty?* There are instances in which, by using the singular verbal form instead of the plural one and by eliminating the personal pronoun of politeness, the politeness degree of the utterance is reduced: *Domnule doctor Ionescu, ai fost de gardă?*

As far as the verbal forms and lexical means are concerned, they cannot be approached from a grammatical point of view without taking into account the pragmatic perspective.

From the pragmatic point of view, to be polite means to be mindful of our interlocutor, to have a certain responsibility towards the receiver throughout a verbal exchange. Pragmatic notions, like *speech act, verbal exchange, illocutionary act, illocutionary force* are more and more relevant in the study of politeness.

Most studies on politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon have as a reference point Brown and Levinson's theory according to which any speech act (like a promise, a threat, an offer, an assertion, a refusal etc.), as well as any non-verbal act are, in fact, face-threatening acts that inherently damage the face of the addressee or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. Thus, we can speak of a positive face, which refers to the individual's desire to be liked, admired and ratified.



Maintaining a positive face means maintaining and exhibiting a positive self-image to the rest of the society. On the other hand, we can speak of a negative face, which refers to the individual's desire not to have his/her basic rights and freedoms impeded by others. Whereas positive face involves a desire to be connected to others, negative face involves a person's ability to act on his/her own interests. In order to diminish the effects that face-threatening acts may produce and which can prevent an efficient communication to take place, it is necessary to apply some strategies taking into account the two forms of politeness: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is oriented towards protecting the positive face of both the sender and the receiver, by avoiding using some potentially threatening formulas (criticism, reproach etc.) that can damage the positive face of the receiver, even if the principle of sincerity is violated. Negative politeness is oriented towards protecting the territory, that is the negative face of the interlocutors, by flattering the receiver through different formulas (compliments, expressing agreement, giving thanks).

Positive politeness strategies are intended to reduce the threat to the listener's positive face. Positive politeness strategies include: finding common ground, using statements of friendship, juxtaposing criticism with compliments. This type of strategies are aimed to make the listeners feel good about themselves and avoid conflict or offense by emphasizing friendliness and politeness. The Romanian language makes use of positive politeness strategies in a variety of linguistic contexts. For instance, interlocutors who do not know each other can get to talk about private matters in order to find some common ground and to create a familiar atmosphere. In this respect, the Romanian culture is different from the Anglo-Saxon culture, where people who are strangers avoid talking about intimate matters. Positive politeness strategies are very well reflected in the Romanian family setting, between friends, young people, work colleagues, the use of the 2nd person singular personal pronoun *tu* (= *you*) creating a familiar atmosphere, irrespective of age. Romanians are inclined to give up official, highly polite language and adopt a more familiar way of communicating, even in those situations in which the social status of the interlocutors might require the use of a formal language. Among the most frequent positive politeness strategies which the Romanians make use of, we can mention:

- giving reasons for performing a certain request, thus diminishing the aggressivity of the face-threatening act: *Îmi poți împrumuta niște bani? Mi-am uitat portofelul acasă.* (= *Can you lend me some money? I have forgotten my wallet at home.*)



- making a promise: *Promit să te sun mâine.* (= *I promise I will call you tomorrow.*)
- the involvement of the receiver in the verbal exchange: *Am putea ieși în oraș diseară.* (= *We could go out tonight.*)
- using a familiar way of addressing: *Tu poți alege restaurantul, eu aleg ziua.* (= *You can choose the restaurant, I can choose the day.*)
- paying attention to the interlocutor's needs and desires: *Sper că te-ai simțit bine la petrecere.* (= *I hope you enjoyed the party.*)
- using some familiar ways of addressing: *dragă, scumpo, iubi* (= *dear, honey, sweetheart*)
- using colloquial speech

Negative politeness strategies are oriented towards the hearer's negative face and emphasize avoidance of imposition on the hearer. Such strategies include: hedging, minimizing the imposition, being indirect, apologizing, giving deference, being pessimistic, using questions rather than commands. The Romanian language makes use of negative politeness strategies in a variety of linguistic contexts. For instance, the use of the plural verbal form when addressing someone is a way to maintain power distance and to respect status difference. By using different verbal moods, the speaker is making his/her intentions known directly or indirectly. Among the politeness strategies that imply indirect speech acts, we can mention: various verbal mechanisms, such as performative verbs, syntactic and lexical euphemisms, the conditional mood (used to express a request in an indirect way), certain adverbs (in order to establish connection between the sender and the receiver), rhetoric questions, ambiguities, repetitions and passive voice.

Among the most frequent negative politeness strategies which the Romanians make use of, we can mention:

- indirect expression of a direct speech act: an interrogative or a declarative sentence used instead of an imperative sentence for giving an order: *De ce nu deschizi fereastra?* (= *Why don't you open the window?*) / *Este foarte cald aici.* (= *It is very warm in here.*) instead of *Deschide fereastra!* (= *Open the window!*); an interrogative question instead of a declarative statement implying wariness: *Poate fi lucrul ăsta adevărat?* (= *Could such a thing be true?*); a statement implying assertion instead of reproach: *Pun pariu că ai uitat să uzi florile.* (= *I bet you forgot to water the flowers.*)
- using interrogative forms with modal verbs in order to express a request: *Ai putea să ...?* (= *Could you ...?*); *Ai vrea să ...?* (= *Would you ...?*)
- using the imperfect tense (in English: Past Tense Continuous) as a politeness device: *Mă întrebam cine ți-a spus adevărul.* (= *I was wondering who told you the truth.*)



- using the conditional tense or a modal verb after an imperative sentence in order to diminish the face-threatening of an order or command: *Închide ușa! Vrei? / Ai vrea?* (= *Close the door! Will you?*)
- using „preliminaries” for questions: *Pot să îți pun o întrebare?* (= *Can I ask you a question?*), for requests: *Îți pot cere o favoare?* (= *Can I ask you a favour?*), for objections: *Pot să fac o mică obiecție?* (= *Can I make an objection?*) or for invitations: *Pot să te invit la cină diseară?* (= *Can I invite you to dinner tonight?*)
- using conversational repairs in the case of some disturbance: *Îmi pare rău, dar chiar trebuie să plec.* (= *Sorry, but I really have to go.*)
- using speech act minimizers: *Vreau doar să îți cer o mică favoare.* (= *I only want to ask you a small favour.*)
- using some techniques to maximize modesty: *Nu știu cum să încep: îmi poți împrumuta niște bani?* (= *I don't know how to put this: can you lend me some money?*)
- using an impersonal way of addressing: *N-ar strica o ceașcă de cafea.* (= *I could do with a cup of coffee.*)
- maximizing praise of others: *Ce gustoasă e mâncarea!* (= *What a delightful meal!*)
- Minimizing benefit to self: *Cu plăcere! N-a fost mare lucru!* (= *You're welcome! Don't mention it!*)

Unlike the Romanian language, the English language makes use of a fewer grammatical means in expressing politeness. English does not have politeness pronouns and does not use plural verbal forms in order to mark the social distance. Pronominal forms must be interpreted strictly in relation to other nominal phrases whose semantic structure includes politeness semes. Only the linguistic context and the relationship between the interlocutors can provide the necessary information in order to interpret a particular utterance in terms of formality level. Depending on the social distance or closeness in relation to a referent, English makes use of intimacy markers (for closeness), honorifics (titles that convey esteem, courtesy, or respect for position or rank) or dishonorifics (honorifics used in an ironic way). We may use different honorific forms of respectful formal address to an aristocrat of noble rank: Your Highness, Your Majesty, Your Grace. Sometimes, the same expression can have different politeness degrees:

Sir, please accept our profound gratitude! (the term of addressing – *sir* – expresses deference) cf. Romanian *Excelență, vă rog să acceptați recunoștința noastră profundă!*

Please, right this way, sir! (in this case the addressing term – *sir* – expresses a standard level of politeness) cf. Romanian *Poftiți, vă rog, pe aici, domnule!*



Watch your step, sir! (*sir*, in this case, becomes a dishonoric) cf. Romanian *Ai grijă pe unde calci, domnule/nene!*

Good evening to you, my good sir! (the addressing term becomes a term of endearment, an intimacy marker) cf. Romanian *Seară bună, bunul meu domn!*

When expressing politeness in English, positive and negative politeness strategies are relevant for a better understanding of this phenomenon from the pragmatic point of view. The role of any verbal exchange is to preserve *face*, each of the interlocutors aiming at supporting each other. Politeness is therefore a balance between the demonstration of close and distant relations.

Positive politeness serves to mutually preserve the positive *faces* of the interlocutors and to avoid disagreements between each other. Thus, to establish contact with a certain individual, the British have to shorten the distance with the help of some positive politeness strategies, which are aimed at demonstrating a positive attitude of the speaker to the interlocutor. This kind of communicative approach can be observed in greetings and farewells, which are characterized by verbosity and verbal demonstration of good will and attention. It is not enough for the British to say *thank you* one single time for expressing gratitude or *goodbye* when leaving. The more words are used in the verbal exchange, the more polite the communication is considered. The British are used to greet, apologize and thank very often in order to show their sympathy, to reduce the distance and to establish contact with people they don't know very well.

A topic, such as the weather, is used by British people to overcome the distance. It can be seen as a kind of code that the British use to say hello or simply start a conversation with unfamiliar persons, The speaker's communication goal is to demonstrate the addressee his/her consideration, sympathy, desire to avoid disagreements of any kind. In Anglo-Saxon culture it is highly polite to accept a compliment graciously: *What a wonderful drawing! I wish I had your talent!* The interlocutor is supposed to feel good because his work is appreciated.

At the other pole, negative politeness serves to preserve the independence of the individual and the need for privacy. Researchers have considered that negative politeness is the basis of English respectful behaviour. This can be explained by the fact that the English culture is an individualistic one, which is centered on the individual and his desire to eliminate formalism in human relationships. A relaxed attitude and a diminished reverence are enlightening in this respect. The disappearance of the politeness pronouns *thou/thee* from the spoken language and the removal of the nouns *Mr./Mrs.* in front of various titles, like *doctor*,



professor are instances of the desire of eliminating boundaries existing between people.

Distance, reserve and self-deprecation are important concepts as far as negative politeness in British discourse is concerned. At the discourse level, they are rendered by indirectness, hints, apologies and a lack of assertiveness.

Indirectness seems to be an essential politeness strategy characterizing the British culture. For example, the interrogative form can be used with other intentions than the interrogative purpose: it can be informative and render the speaker's needs and intentions, it can have an affirmative purpose, it can represent an advice, a request or it can have a different illocutionary force. An utterance, like „*Can you open the door?*” might be interpreted as a question regarding the interlocutor's capacity to close the door, but its real meaning is, in fact, a request to close the door, which the speaker is addressing to the hearer. This is an illustrative example of an illocutionary act.

The use of modal verbs, such as *could, would, should, might*, is another strategy in negative politeness as it minimizes the imposition of the action verb that follows it. In order to avoid face-threatening acts, speakers often used impersonalized patterns, such as *it / there + a modal verb form*. In an example, such as „*It would be better if you closed the door.*”, the speaker tactfully suggests the addressee to close the door instead of being directly assertive: *Close the door!* Moreover, some patterns consisting of *I + modal lexical verb + that clause*, are used with the same purpose: *I think that we should leave.*

In addition, there are some constructions, as *let me..., I would like to + action verb*, which are used before expressing an opinion or performing an act: „*Let me do the dishes.*” Thus, the speaker places himself/herself on the same position as the hearer.

Criticism is often softened with the help of *pseudo-conditionals* or *apology + but clauses*: „*If you forgive my asking, what on earth were you thinking?*” Here, the hearer could interpret this question as rude without the pseudo-conditional softening the impact of the message at the end of the utterance.

Among other types of indirectness strategies, we can mention some adverbials of the type *perhaps, probably, maybe, possibly*, which act as down-toners and are used to diminish the strong impact of the negative statement: „*Will you come to the party tonight?*” „*Perhaps I won't be able to get there.*”

The use of euphemisms is another negative politeness strategy, the harsh words implying negative connotations being replaced by less offensive terms: „*He speaks on behalf of disadvantaged people who view*



themselves as victims of racism." In this case, *disadvantaged* is an euphemism for *poor*.

Non-conventional indirectness also consists of hints and implications. British people are not saying what they actually mean when the truth might be unpleasant for the hearer. There are different ways in which a person could refuse an invitation when he/she does not want to offend his/her interlocutor. „*I can't come to your birthday party*” can be replaced by one of these utterances: „*I might be out of town.*” / „*I have much homework to do.*” / „*I am expecting my grandparents to come by.*” None of these sentences explicitly says „*I can't come to your birthday party.*” Nevertheless, they all contain hints which refer to the negative politeness principle. By using such hints, the speaker shows concern for the interlocutor.

Self-deprecation is another way of expressing negative politeness, since the British are very much concerned to preserve each other's face and to put the others in the first place after themselves. By underestimating one's virtues, one appears to be modest and less embarrassed if those particular virtues are of higher values than of those you communicate with. On the other hand, if the interlocutor has fewer achievements, by underestimating yourself, you make him/her feel more comfortable in your company. As being modest is very important in British culture, a good way to do this is by using humour. Humour can occur in any situation, as it penetrates every aspect of the English life and culture. This system of self-mockery fits like a glove with the British as all of them are aware that self-deprecation actually means the opposite of what people say and, thus, the listener is impressed by both the achievements and the reluctance to speak about them freely.

Our survey has been focused on expressing politeness strategies from the pragmatic point of view, depending on two factors: positive politeness and negative politeness. Both Romanian and British interlocutors choose from these two major types of politeness, taking into account certain objective and subjective factors which characterize the conversational context. The characteristics of the mechanisms according to which the Romanian and British interlocutors choose a certain type of strategy show similarities and differences. It is very important for all the interlocutors pertaining to the cultures of both the Romanian and the British societies to thoroughly understand the similarities and differences in the polite behaviour so that the intercultural exchange would take place in an appropriate manner.



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