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Face threatening acts and politeness strategies in summer school application calls

This paper aims to explore the pragmatic aspects of summer school application calls in the framework of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The first part of the paper elaborates on the theoretical foundation of the phenomena of politeness and facework and the second presents the research work. The corpus for this study was comprised of sixty application calls from thirty-three European countries, referring to the period from 2009 to 2012. The content of the calls was analysed in terms of the frequency and quality of positive and negative face-threatening acts, as well as the deployment of various politeness strategies. The findings are also interpreted within the context framed by extralinguistic factors, such as the academic field, participation fee rates and the summer school venue.

Key words: summer schools; call for application; politeness; face-threatening acts.

1. Introduction

Each year numerous students decide to attend some form of summer schools. The term refers to shorter academic programmes organised by universities or other educational institutions during summer holidays. Attending such programmes has many benefits recognised in educational and academic domain, since research show that it prevents the summer slide, but also enhances participants' intercultural social and communicative skills.

While students struggle with filling out the application forms and working on their motivational letters, the summer school organisation committees face another



challenge – they are to produce attractive and effective promotional materials advertising their programme. Among these, the call for application is crucial, since it is the initial means of communicating with the prospective participants and, therefore, it must capture their attention. Ideally, it seeks to present the highlights of the summer school programme, but avoiding grossly excessive self-praise and elevation. It should be designed to urge the high-profiled candidates to apply, but without imperiousness or pleas. Furthermore, these calls regularly address an international audience and are written in English, a non-native tongue for the majority of authors.

However, these kinds of text have received very little linguistic attention. This research aims to explore such writings within the framework of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. The paper opens with a theoretical part discussing issues in conceptualisation of linguistic politeness and face phenomena, special emphasis being placed on Brown and Levinson's theory. The central part is the analysis conducted on a specially comprised corpus of application calls, examined for the occurrence of face-threatening acts and politeness strategies. This is followed by a qualitative and quantitative exploration of the findings and their interpretation in relation to pragmalinguistic but also some extralinguistic factors.

2. Politeness theory framework

2.1. *On politeness and face*

The phenomenon of politeness has been defined and interpreted from various perspectives. Apart from Brown and Levinson's theory, which has been chosen as the grounds for this research and will be presented further on, many other scholars made significant contribution in theorising the concept of politeness. Dimitrova-Galazci notes that a

... part of the problem in defining politeness comes from the lack of a universal formal and functional equivalence across cultures, from the different perceptions and motivations behind it across cultures and the close and often difficult to untangle link between the folk understanding of politeness and the theoretical concept (2002: 1).

The distinction between linguistic and lay notion of politeness is of great salience. Kasper differentiates between the commonsense view of politeness, referring to adequate social behaviour and considerateness towards others, and pragmatic view, referring to "ways in which relational function in linguistic action is expressed" (1990: 3206). Similarly, Janney and Arndt (1992) distinguish between the



concept of social politeness and the concept of interpersonal politeness, while Watts (2003) contrasts first-order politeness, i.e. polite behaviour, and second-order politeness, i.e. politic behaviour.

Leech (1983) classifies politeness in four different categories according to the inherent functions of communication acts. The convivial function of politeness manifests in cases when illocutionary and social communication aim coincide, as in when interactants are greeting, congratulating, offering, inviting, etc. The collaborative function refers to contexts in which the illocutionary and the social aim are independent of one another, when speakers declare, assert, report, announce, etc. The competitive function of politeness is realised in situations where the illocutionary goal competes with the social goal and speakers, order, ask, demand, beg, etc. The conflicting function entails a conflict between the illocutionary and the social goal and occurs when speakers threaten, accuse and, in general, express negative feelings and reactions.

For many scholars, politeness is undoubtedly connected to the notions of face and facework. Goffman (1967: 5) describes the concept of face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact”, but its conclusive defining is as challenging as that of politeness. Non-Western scholars frequently criticise this definition, pointing out that it is essentially individualistic and, therefore, cannot be applied to prevalently collectivistic cultures. Chinese scholars suggest that face is a public and positive category, situationally constructed and framed by the interlocutors’ interpersonal relations (Lim 1994; Ho 1994). Furthermore, Japanese notion of face, apart from the relation to others, delineates speakers’ individual rights, whereas African and Islamic researchers emphasise the group rather than individual face interests (Villki 2006). However, there is a consensus on its dynamism; face can be enhanced, preserved, damaged or even lost.

Fraser (1990) elaborates on four possible perspectives on politeness. The *social-norm view* presents politeness as socially appropriate behaviour, pleasant towards others. The *conversational-contract view* sets politeness within the frames of conversational contract between the interlocutors and suggests its dependency on correct context interpretation. The *conversational-maxim view*, suggested in the works of Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), finds its grounds in Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle which assumes cooperation between the interlocutors. Grice lists conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner, which are to assure a successful communication. Lastly, *the face-saving view* defines politeness as a linguistic behaviour with the objective of preserving and/or enhancing one’s face.



Watts made an influential contribution to *face-saving view* of politeness. He argues that politeness theory should not be utterly equalled to face/facework theories. As mentioned, he distinguishes between first-order and second-order politeness and notes that (im)politeness¹ aims “to explain how all the interactants engaged in an ongoing verbal interaction negotiate the development of emergent networks and evaluate their own position and the positions of others within those networks” (2003: 255). Within the politeness² or politic behaviour, he includes both supportive facework and sanctioned aggressive facework. However, he asserts that linguistic utterances are not inherently polite but, individually interpreted as such and many expressions interpreted as politeness are in fact only formulaic and conventionalised.

Lastly, politeness can be examined through the contrast of strategic device and social indexing device. It is variously labelled by different scholars, e.g. Kasper (1990) uses terms social indexing and strategic politeness; Hill et al. (1986) discernment politeness and volition politeness, Gu (1990) normative politeness and instrumental politeness. This distinction casts light on two functional aspects of politeness – a strategy of achieving conversational goals and a device for delineating social power relations.

2.2. Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory

Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory was developed based on the research of politeness in three languages, English, Tzeltal and Tamil. It is founded on two basic assumptions, the first being that all interactants have a *face*, the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting of two related aspects:

- (i) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. freedom of action and freedom from imposition
- (ii) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or personality (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61)

The second assumption is that the interactants have the rational abilities to achieve certain goals. Face is socio-culturally dynamic property changeable through interaction with others. To maintain their face, speakers, as rational agents, accept its vulnerability and are prepared to cooperate with others. Everyday communication involves the use of face-threatening acts (FTA), “that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (Brown and



Levinson, 1987: 65). FTAs can threaten both the speaker's and the hearer's face. Also, they can obstruct both positive and negative aspect of one's face.

Negative FTAs obstruct the speaker's or the hearer's freedom of action and freedom from imposition. These can be threatening to the hearer when they:

- a) place pressure on the hearer to perform or not to perform a particular action; e.g. advice, suggestions, requests, orders, reminders, warning, threats.
- b) express the speaker's strong negative feelings or opinions of the hearer or hearer's belongings; e.g. hatred, anger, lust, compliments, expressions of envy, admiration
- c) indicate some positive future actions of the speaker towards the hearer, which compel the hearer to either reject or accept it; e.g. promises, offers.

FTAs which threaten the speaker's negative face are those that pose an offence to one's face, e.g. expressing thanks, accepting the hearer's thanks/apology/offers, excuses, responses to hearer's faux pas, unwilling promises and offers.

Positive FTAs inflict damage to one's face by denoting the interlocutor's lack of appreciation and/or approval for one's feelings, wants, desires, etc. These threaten the hearer's face by:

- i. expressing the speaker's negative evaluation of the hearer's positive face, e.g., disapproval, criticism, insults, accusations, complaints, reprimands, contradictions, disagreements;
- ii. expressing lack of care for the hearer's positive face, e.g. excessive emotionality, irreverence, misuse of honorifics, mention of taboo topics, belittling, boasting, non-sequiturs, interruptions.

The speaker's positive face is threatened by acts which indicate that one has made a transgression or lost control over the situation, e.g. apologies, confessions, admissions of guilt or responsibility, acceptance of compliments, self-humiliation, self-contradiction, emotion leakage, etc.

Brown and Levinson interpret politeness precisely in relation to FTAs – they define it as face-saving behaviour, i.e. the employment of threat minimising strategies (1987: 68). When discussing politeness strategies, they differentiate between several categories. Bald-on record strategy does not involve any redressive actions, but it is nevertheless acceptable in situations where the speaker and the hearer “both tacitly agree that the relevance of face demands may be suspended in the interests of urgency or efficiency”, or “where the danger to the hearer's face is very small”



(Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). Positive politeness strategy is employed to minimise the threat to hearer's positive face and entails utterance which express interest for the hearer's needs and wants, contain in-group identity markers, optimism, humour and avoidance of disagreement. Negative politeness strategies are deployed to avoid or decrease potential damage to the hearer's negative face and include utterances containing hedges or question, pessimism, indirectness, obviating structures, apologies, etc. Finally, off-record or indirect politeness strategy turns to completely indirect utterances, which avert the potential threat from the speaker.

Although Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has received a lot of criticism, especially on the grounds of it not being universally applicable across cultures and its interpretation of the concept of face, it certainly set milestones for further research of politeness. The corpus body in this research is highly diverse in terms of nationality, but all the instances pertaining to the Western civilisation circle. This somewhat diminishes the obstacle related to culture non-universality which would, as previously indicated, be much more articulated in comparison with the non-Western ones. Therefore, the universal politeness model outlined in Brown and Levinson's theory will serve to reveal some general characteristics of politeness patterns in calls for application.

3. Research methodology

3.1. *Research objective*

FTAs and other politeness related phenomena have not yet been explored in the texts of summer school calls for application (CFAs). Therefore, this small-scale study is intended to provide an insight into occurrence of these pragmalinguistic phenomena. The analysis had a two-fold research objective. Firstly, it aimed to explore the quality and quantity of FTAs in such texts, and, secondly, to investigate the deployment of politeness strategies utilised to minimise the face damage in cases when it ensues.

It should also be noted that a universalistic approach such as Brown and Levinson's which was adopted in this research offers a very general overview of the politeness features occurring in CFAs, while specific culturally conditioned characteristics could be further explored in synergy with sociolinguistic approach and through comparative cross-cultural research.



3.2. *Research corpus*

A special corpus of texts was comprised for the sole purpose of this research. It presents a compilation of summer school CFAs. This genre was convenient for the research because CFAs are susceptible to FTA usage due to the functional aspect and underlying communicative purpose. The summer schools in question were organised by universities or educational institutions from thirty three different European countries. They vary in academic content, covering fields from medicine to fine arts; as well as in duration and financial expenditures they entail. All the CFAs have been published in the period from 2009 to 2012.

The texts were gathered from specialised summer schools web-sites or universities and educational institutions web sites. They were either found in documents or sections entitled “Call for Application” and likewise, or, where it was not possible, were extracted from the general section of the web page. A total of sixty adequate texts were included in the corpus.

3.3. *Analysis method*

After the initial phase in which the corpus texts were gathered, the following stage entailed their quantitative and qualitative analysis. The texts were manually processed in the search of positive and negative FTAs and politeness strategies utterances. The findings are systematically presented and elaborated in the following section. Notwithstanding all the effort, it is necessary to note that this method leaves room for mistakes (misdetections of FTAs or politeness strategies employment) or omissions (failures to detect the occurrence or politeness strategies employment). Furthermore, since a small-scale corpus is processed here, no sweeping generalisations can be made based on the results, but the findings might serve to lay out some general tendencies within the given genre.

4. Research results

4.1. *Face-threatening acts and politeness strategies in CFAs*

The exploration of CFA texts resulted in a total of 197 detected FTAs, which indicates an average of 3.28 FTAs per CFA. The isolated FTAs were categorised as positive or negative and as aimed towards the hearer or the speaker. The figures presented in Table 1 reveal that negative FTAs occur more frequently and that vast majority of FTAs pose a threat to the hearer’s rather than the speaker’s face.



Table 1. Face threatening acts occurrence in the corpus.

FTAs	(N)
Negative	111
To the Hearer	110
To the Speaker	1
Positive FTAs	86
To the Hearer	85
To the Speaker	1
Total	197

Table 2. Negative face threatening acts.

NEGATIVE FTAs	(N)
To the Hearer	110
Offer	35
Suggestion	19
Promise	16
Request	13
Compliment	12
Advice	9
Warning	4
Reminding	2
To the Speaker	1
Expressing gratitude	1

These FTAs include large numbers of offers, promises and requests:

- (1) *We offer a truly international experience in one of the world's most culturally diverse cities.*
- (2) *Being a part of LSE Summer School will give you the opportunity to study and live centrally in one of the leading global cities in the world.*
- (3) *The teaching language is English, and therefore all participants must be fluent in spoken English.*

However, there are also warnings and expressions of gratitude:

- (4) *Please note that no grants are available to students from non-partner universities and the Centre for Small State Studies cannot provide visa support services to students from outside the EEA/Schengen area.*



- (5) *Education Committee of SCB-Europe gave birth to the GSS and is grateful to see it growing and offering knowledge and pleasure to European students.*

Table 3. Positive face threatening acts

POSITIVE FTAs	(N)
To the Hearer	85
Boasting	80
Challenge	3
Belittling	1
Disagreement	1
To the Speaker	1
Self-humiliation	1

Positive FTAs (Table 3.) are found in 5 different forms, 4 threatening the hearer and 1 threatening the speaker. Over 94% of positive FTAs are utterances of boasting:

- (6) *We work for the best of the world in order to be one of the best universities in the world.*

There are also FTAs conveying challenge and self-humiliation:

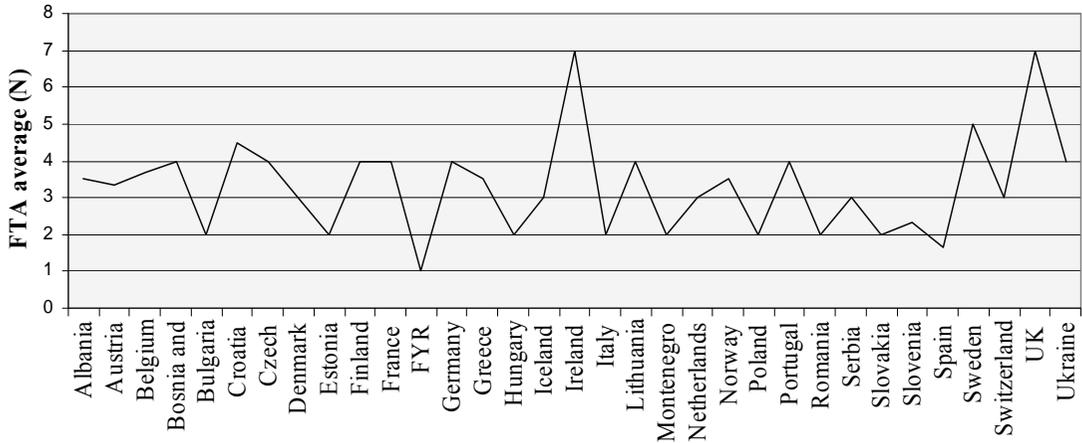
- (8) *Come and explore Sweden yourself!*
 (8) *Making ICS totally free of charge we are hoping that our small contribution might make the difference.*

With regard to extralinguistic factors such as national origin, the overall distribution is fairly even and there is no significant difference in frequency of FTAs regarding the location of summer school. However, CFAs from UK, Ireland and Sweden CFAs show slightly increased average FTA occurrence (Figure 1), but it is important to note that, due to its size, the corpus cannot be representative of national trends.

The CFAs were also explored in terms of participants' financial expenditure in order to discover if and how the summer school participation fee rate is related to FTA frequency. The correlation between average daily fee (participation fee/number of days) and FTA number is r (per diem, N) ≈ 0.0452 .



Figure 1. Overall FTA distribution among countries



Further analysis discovered that FTAs which the CFA authors produced are, as a rule, followed by politeness strategy utterances. In order to minimise the potential damage to one's face various strategies were employed. Majority included positive and negative politeness:

- (9) *In the end, however, the success of Summer School depends on a critical partnership between you the student and us the faculty at LSE.*
- (10) *To solidify their language and cultural gains, students are also encouraged to take advantage of the summer program in Tirana.*

but bald on-record politeness utterances were also present in the corpus:

- (11) *Play your part!*
- (12) *Join us in 2012 and enjoy an unforgettable summer together with students from around the globe!*

4.2. Interpretation

Before interpreting the research it is necessary to make some initial remarks regarding the scope of the study. Firstly, the research corpus is relatively small, which does not allow for broad generalisations. However, it can still be illustrative of some pragmalinguistic tendencies pertinent to this specific genre of writing. Secondly, it must be noted that the majority of authors are non-native speakers of English, addressing an international body of prospective applicants. This is of impor-



tance since pragmatic competence acquisition presents one of the most challenging SLA aspects.

When reflecting upon the research results, it first becomes evident that all of CFAs in the corpus contain at least one, and on average 3.28 FTAs. This discovers the relation between the purpose of these texts and the necessity of FTA occurrence; their use is evidently essential in attracting the applicants' attention. Qualitative analysis of research findings reveal a glaring discrepancy between the number of FTAs threatening the hearer's face (N=195) and those threatening the speaker's face (N=2). This is due to the fact that the purpose of CFAs is to put a certain degree of pressure upon the hearer to perform a particular action, namely to apply for the summer school programme. It also explains a greater number of negative FTAs, because precisely the negative FTAs try to influence one's behaviour and threaten one's feeling of independence and control. Fourteen different types of FTAs were identified altogether. Negative FTAs are more heterogeneous and present a larger variety of types, most numerous being offers, suggestions, promises, requests and compliments. Positive FTAs are rather homogenous, with over ninety percent of utterances expressing boasting (the most frequent FTA type in the entire corpus), and only rare occurrence of, for example, disagreements or challenges. Again, these figures are undoubtedly influenced by the agenda underlying the CFA publication, and that is to attract interest, develop fancy and, finally, prompt to the action of applying.

From a sociolinguistic perspective it was interesting to explore if and which extralinguistic factors influence the frequency of FTAs. The analysis according to the location of the summer school cannot be representative of general national tendencies, but the findings from this corpus show that slightly larger number of FTAs appear in CFAs for summer schools organised in the UK, Ireland and Sweden. CFAs were also categorised in terms of financial expenditure, i.e. the participation fee. After listing per diem fees for every summer school, it was examined whether there is a correlation between this figure and the number of FTAs in the CFA. However, no significant correlation ($r \approx 0.452$) was established, which negates any interdependence between the number of FTAs and summer school price in this corpus.

Finally, it remains to address the utilisation of politeness strategies in the research corpus. The analysis shows that FTA occurrence is followed by politeness strategy employment. The majority are positive politeness strategies, especially expressions containing in-group identity markers to enhance solidarity or amendments, and negative politeness strategies, mostly indirect obviate expressions. Few



bald on-record strategy instances also appear, usually at the beginning or at the very end of the CFA text, positioned so as to attract the addressee's attention.

5. Conclusion

The present study revealed that FTAs and adherent politeness strategy utterances are very likely to appear in summer school CFAs. Substantial majority of FTAs are directed towards the hearer and threaten one's negative face. Qualitative analysis shows that FTAs which place pressure on the hearer to perform or not to perform a particular action, like suggestions, requests, orders and warnings, can frequently be found in CFAs, as well as those expressing boasting, which are the most numerous FTA type in the entire corpus. The employment of politeness strategies is also very common in CFAs, most of them being positive and negative strategies, whereas bald on-record strategies emerge positioned on noticeable places in the texts.

The interpretation of analysis findings is certainly restricted due to corpus size and ethnic heterogeneity of its sources, but it nevertheless might offer an initial insight into pragmalinguistic tendencies and patterns characteristic of this particular genre of writing. Moreover, the study calls for further more extensive research in this domain, using more voluminous corpora and focusing on some distinct cross-cultural differences appearing in this genre.

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¹ Due to the limited space in the paper, only the cited CFAs are listed. For entire corpus, please contact the author.



The King's College London Summer School. <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/summerschool/index.aspx>.

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ČINOVI UGROŽAVANJA OBRAZA I STRATEGIJE ULJUDNOSTI U NATJEČAJIMA ZA SUDJELOVANJE U LJETNIM ŠKOLAMA

Istraživanje se bavi pragmatičkim aspektom tekstova natječaja za sudjelovanje u ljetnim školama, i to u kontekstu teorije uljudnosti Brown i Levinsona (1987). Prvi dio rada iznosi teorijske odrednice koncepta uljudnosti i obraza, a drugi provedeno istraživanje. Prikupljen je korpus od šezdeset tekstova natječaja za ljetne škole iz trideset tri europske zemlje, objavljenih u razdoblju od 2009. do 2012. U tekstovima je analizirana učestalost i kategorije pojavnosti činova ugrožavanja obraza te korištenje strategija uljudnosti. Usustavljeni rezultati također su interpretirani u kontekstu izvanjezičnih faktora, poput visine naknade za sudjelovanje i države u kojoj je škola organizirana.

Ključne riječi: ljetne škole; činovi ugrožavanja obraza; strategije uljudnosti.