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Explorations in Linguistics

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Politeness Strategies Employed by College Students in Uncomfortable Situations

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Abstract

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), there are four politeness strategies people employ within interactions. Past literature has indicated that societal norms play an important role in the way men and women interact in the public sphere. Such norms are tantamount to one gender employing more apologies, or being more indirect than the other. Building on these research findings, the current study examines the use of politeness strategies within the context of an awkward social situation, particularly in a university setting. Twenty college students were subjected to a trial wherein the experimenter would take their seat when the student left it unoccupied. The students' resulting reaction to this unexpected transgression was then examined. This study examines the various requests, categorizes them based on the four politeness strategies, and aims to analyze whether one gender is prone to using a certain politeness strategy over the other.

Introduction

From the time we first learn to speak, we are primed to acquire certain politeness behaviors that are widely accepted by society. Beginning with learning to say "please" and "thank you" and developing the skill to recognize when it is appropriate to apologize, one might observe that these techniques take a long time to absorb. However, no one can ever be truly prepared to employ such strategies in every situation. Even when primed with the correct responses, an occasion is bound to arise in which a person will not know what to do. Thus, the question is how does one respond when faced with an awkward situation?

This is the issue the current study is going to address. We aim to answer the follow questions: How do students employ politeness strategies while acknowledging

such circumstances? Does gender have an effect on their responses? What did they want to say initially, and how does what they wanted to say compare to what they actually uttered? In summary, we aim to investigate how individuals react when faced with the unanticipated situation of someone taking his/her seat.

Previous Research

Brown and Levinson (1987) constructed a politeness theory which consists of three ideas: face, face threatening acts and politeness strategies. Face refers to the public's perception, or "self-image," of an individual. Face threatening acts are defined as speech acts that can damage the way others perceive an individual. For example, if someone's clothing was insulted loudly in a public setting, that person was victim to a face threatening act. Thus, in order to combat any negative change to one's social status, Brown and Levinson (1987) provide four politeness strategies: bald-on record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness. While explaining each strategy, we will present an example that is concerned with an individual (Person 1) asking his friend to take him home from school using politeness strategies.

In bald-on record politeness, the speaker makes no effort to save his face. He speaks the truth, is relevant, concise and avoids ambiguity when possible (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Example:

Person 1: I want you to drop me off at home.

In this situation, Person 1 makes his wish explicit to the hearer, devoid of any emotion or respect.

In positive politeness, the speaker assumes that the individuals involved in a dialogue are friends or close peers. Due to this, in-group markers such as slang are often used.

Example:

Person 1: Hey Bro! Can I catch a ride with you?

Here, Person 1 states his request by addressing his friend as a "brother." After that, he presents his request in a manner that is indicative of the existence of a relationship between the speaker and the hearer. By mentioning his request in such a manner, the speaker is able to "evoke [from the friend] all the shared associations and attitudes" that he and his friend possess (Brown and Levinson, p.111).

In negative politeness, the speaker prefers not to impose on his audience. As a result, he may preface his sentence with an apology or a statement similar to one. Negative differs from positive politeness in that this strategy is used when the speaker and the hearer are mere acquaintances as opposed to comrades. As a result, the speaker is direct in his request. In addition, since both the speaker and the hearer might not know each other, the speaker refrains from mentioning an in-group marker (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Example:

Person 1: I don't mean to bother you, but I wanted to know if it would be possible for you to drop me off at home?

In this example, the seemingly verbose request denotes respect for the hearer. In addition, the speaker is trying not to impose himself on the other person. He does this by prefacing to the hearer that he would prefer to not bother him. This lessens the possibility of conflict and implies that there may be a difference in the relationship between the two individuals (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

Finally, with off-record politeness, the speaker tries to give hints to the hearer about his objective. The main goal of this strategy is for the speaker to convey his wishes indirectly to the hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The speaker wants the listener to come to their own realization about the speaker's need for assistance. It is implied that the listener feels obliged to help him. Subsequent research notes that the caveat with this approach is that the desired result may be misconstrued, or the hearer may act as if the utterance of the speaker was not heard (Zhao Peng-Liang, 2013).

Example:

Person 1: I sure could use a ride back home.

With this example, the hearer is not being directly imposed upon by the speaker. However, the expected response is for the hearer to reply by offering a ride upon realizing the speaker's need for a carpool.

As mentioned in the introduction, the current study examines how individuals respond to someone else taking their seat. Such a response may be classified to be a form of relational work. According to Locher (2006), relational work refers to the effort individuals invest in maintaining relationships with others. In the study, Locher (2006) reviewed 280 letters from young people to health advisors. She arranged the responses of the doctors based on topics such as: declaratives, imperatives, and interrogatives. She found that advice was given most frequently in the interrogative form, meaning that doctors would respond to the letters by posing questions right back at those who wrote them. An example of this interrogative approach that Locher (2006) encountered was, "Is it possible that the reason why your parents told you that you shouldn't be kissing is because of religious or cultural reasons, or is it based on the belief that kissing will lead to sexual activity...?" (p.260) She concludes that this is due to, "downtoning the face-threatening act of 'telling someone what to do' by means of involving an advice-seeker with a question and stressing optionality... so advice is structured as a suggestion instead of an order," (p.261). By being less forceful with their advice, the health advisors distanced themselves from the decision making of the asker, thus leaving the outcome of the situation as the asker's responsibility. As a result, this article enables us to gain a greater understanding of how politeness within requests can be applied in situations where one must confront or advise another, and of how people tend to choose to distance themselves from the issue at hand.

One factor that may influence how polite people are to one another is gender. Two psychologists, Schumann and Ross (2010), conducted a study to examine gender differences in apology situations. They aimed to determine which gender was more inclined to apologize and, more importantly, why. To accomplish this task, they

designed two separate studies to test their hypothesis. For the first study, participants were asked daily for two weeks to describe up to three instances that occurred where they apologized to someone or did something to someone else that might have deserved an apology, regardless of whether or not they gave one. In the second study, participants imagined that they were in three conflict scenarios with a friend. Half imagined a friend of the same gender as themselves, and half imagined a friend of the opposite gender. For each scenario, participants indicated on three 7-point scales (1 being the minimum, and 7 being the maximum) how severe their offense was, the extent to which they believed their friend deserved an apology, and how likely they were to apologize to their friend. Based on their results from both studies, Schumann and Ross (2010) deduced that women do apologize more than men, but this is not because women are passive. It is because men have different thresholds for what constitutes an offensive behavior. Thus, an action that could cause a woman to apologize will not necessarily strike a man as a transgression. These findings show that there is a distinct difference between genders. Thus one could plausibly predict the probability of receiving an apology based on whether a participant is male or female.

One may question the reason behind the relationship between politeness and gender. Modern culture maintains that women who are forceful within workplace settings are viewed negatively by coworkers, often considered bossy or overbearing (Mills, 2005). However, when men act in a similar manner, it is accepted as normal and possibly regarded as a leadership skill. As a result, women tend to act more passively in workplace settings in order to avoid being negatively viewed by others. In her article, Mills (2005) notes that certain speech stereotypes are attributed to be masculine or feminine by the public sphere. Masculine features include the use of directness, swearing, expressions of negative opinions, and non-emotional language. In contrast to this, female stereotypes include deference, hesitation, and modality. By virtue of being stereotypes, these do not prove that men and women speak differently. However, they show how the speech of an individual is perceived in the public sphere. Because of this, speakers do not obey such a notion under any compulsion, but they do orient themselves to such stereotypes when assessing the discourse of the people around them. Thus, when a female employs speech features that are deemed to be masculine, she may be misconstrued to be aberrant by members of society (Mills, 2005).

Sung (2012) notices the above notion of perceived male and female stereotypes in his study of the reality TV show *The Apprentice*. In his research of one particular episode, he saw disapproval from the host Donald Trump when one woman, Omarosa, uttered her comments concerning the performance of her colleagues in a seemingly condescending and explicit manner (Sung, 2012). In the same episode, Sung also noted that the two other women, one of which was eventually fired, were chided by Trump for employing female stereotypes such as acquiescing with the derisive comments from Omarosa (2012). Of the two, the one who stayed on the show remained because she was more direct with her feelings concerning Omarosa's (2012) comments, and thus employed strategies that are perceived to be largely masculine (Sung, 2012). From this example, we see one woman being praised for using a stereotypically masculine approach, while the other one was scolded for using a similar tactic. The woman who used a feminine approach was dismissed from the show overall. While this example is from a reality TV show, it exemplifies Mill's (2005) point. In order to achieve an objective, it may be more advantageous for a woman to address the audience with off-record politeness. If this strategy is misunderstood by the hearers, she would then employ a more bald-on record approach.

In sum, Brown and Levinson (1987) have provided various strategies that one could employ while in a face-threatening act. In trying to compare these with respect to gender and apology frequency, Schumann and Ross (2010) have concluded that women tend to apologize more than men because men have a lower threshold for what situations demand an apology. Mills (2005) goes further and says that society has different perceptions of how a man or a woman ought to act in certain situations, and that these perceptions have the ability to affect how people choose to act in response. Thus, with the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1987) in mind, we aim to study how politeness strategies are employed by men and women faced with an unanticipated awkward situation. We will then evaluate whether our findings are similar to the observations of Schuman and Ross (2010) or can be applied to Mills' (2005) analysis concerning stereotypes and gender.

Context

In a college setting, one may be curious to know how students respond when faced with an uncomfortable situation in which their personal space is invaded. A library is upheld as a study place, where students can go when they need to concentrate on their schoolwork. Many do not want to socialize when they are there, content with remaining in their own space. Thus, when students' respective areas are disrupted, they may not know exactly how to respond. They may be angry, annoyed, or confused, but these feelings are often trumped by the inclination to be polite instead. To study this phenomenon, our experiment was conducted within the context of a university library with the purpose of observing the different politeness techniques used by college students when put in an uncomfortable situation.

Participants

Our participants were comprised of twenty undergraduate college students: 10 females and 10 males. Ages range from 18-22. Participants were chosen on a basis of convenience to the experimenters. We targeted unknown participants who were sitting alone at a table in the library, as opposed to those who may have been involved in study groups in order to keep the experimental situation consistent.

Methods

The experiment's main objective was to put the participant in an uncomfortable situation that would prompt an unsolicited response. For the purposes of our study, the uncomfortable situation was one wherein the participant was faced with their seat being taken by another person. To accomplish this, we would recruit participants in one of two ways. The first way was to scout out tables in the library that were inhabited by a single person. When that person left their table, the transgressing experimenter, who was female, would go and sit in the deserted seat. Another method used to obtain participants was to look for a spot that had been obviously abandoned by a student. That is, we would patrol the library and look for the presence of belongings at a table, such as a laptop, books, or a bag, without an individual present. We would then have the transgressing experimenter sit in the participant's spot until they returned to their table. The experimenter would be sure to spread their own books out over the participant's things. When the participant came back, the responses were noted. The data collected was from a natural interaction, since the participant had no prior idea that they were being observed. The second experimenter, who was male, transcribed the interaction that took place between the transgressing experimenter and the

participant on a chart (see Appendix A), once the participant had realized that their seat was taken. The chart enabled the second experimenter to classify the interaction into one of the aforementioned politeness strategies. After that initial encounter, we informed the participant that we were conducting a study and debriefed them on the details of the experiment. They were then given a survey (see Appendix B) to fill out which asked them to report their sex, discuss how they handled the situation, and if they had thought to say or do something different than what was actually said or done. We then took this information and compiled the data accordingly.

Data Types

The information collected from the interaction between the participant and the transgressor was recorded on a chart detailing the different types of politeness techniques that could be employed according to Brown and Levinson (1987). We also gave the participant a questionnaire to complete at the end of the trial, which allowed us to evaluate their sex and initial reaction. This information was used to evaluate the participant’s implicit urge of what they wished to say, and to compare it to what they actually did say to the experimenter.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the words spoken by our participants upon finding the experimenter in their seat. Then, we categorized those responses according to the aforementioned politeness strategies given by Brown and Levinson (1987): bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness. In the post-interview, we analyzed what the speaker wanted to say as opposed to what they said and noted if there had been any change to their answers. After that, we determined the number of males and females who employed the above strategies.

Findings

Our findings revealed some significant trends in the politeness strategies that were employed by the students. In the table below, we are able to see the breakdown of the responses we received, categorized by the strategy used and the gender of the participant:

Table 1 Response Data

Sex	Bald-On Record Politeness	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness	Off-Record Politeness	Anomaly
Male	0	0	3	6	1
Female	0	0	1	4	5
Total	0	0	4	10	6

Out of twenty participants, none of them employed bald-on record politeness or positive politeness. From the four individuals who used negative politeness, one male student said, "Hey, don't want to be mean. I can move somewhere else," and another male student said, "I could move." The third male student said, "Excuse me, I'm just going to take my stuff." Also, one female student, said, "Excuse me, if you want to sit here, I'll log off the computer."

Ten participants employed off-record politeness. Out of them, six were males. The table below shows the responses of the male and female students. Due to the large number of off-record responses we received, we placed them into a table in order to present them in a concise manner.

Table 2 Off-Record Responses

Male Responses (M)	Female Responses (F)
1. "Do you need this place?"	1. "Excuse me, that's my stuff there."
2. "Excuse me, that's my stuff."	2. "Excuse me, this was my seat"
3. "Excuse me, that's my seat."	3. "I'm sorry, but that was where I was sitting."
4. "Excuse me that's my laptop."	4. "I know you're doing this for class, but you are in my seat.
5. "Excuse me, my stuff's [stuff is] here."	
6. "Excuse me, I was sitting here."	

There were six participants who exhibited anomalies. Out of these, one was male. He said, "Sorry" and began to take his belongings in order to leave. Among the five women, two behaved in the same manner as the male participant. One female participant said, "Hi" and began to pack her belongings. Another female said, "Hi, sorry" and began packing her belongings in order to leave the seat. The last participant did not say a word to the experimenter. She sat on the opposite side of the table and began doing schoolwork as if nothing happened. With regards to the post interview sheet, fourteen people said that they would not change their response, and six reported that they would.

Discussion

Bald-on record politeness

Our results surprisingly revealed that none of our participants employed bald-on record politeness. Instead of confronting the situation head on, participants decided to use indirect methods to approach the transgressing experimenter. Their lack of usage of

this strategy may have been due to the fact that they felt uncomfortable directly telling the experimenter to move. The experimenter was also a female, and this could have affected how the participants reacted to her, as they may have been more predisposed to treat her nicely. Nonetheless, the fact that all 20 participants refrained from using more severe language to address the situation suggests that college students have less confrontational politeness tendencies, preferring to utilize methods such as off the record and negative politeness.

Positive politeness

Through our data analysis, we found that none of the participants used positive politeness either. They never attempted to establish a common ground with the experimenter, nor did they engage in the use of in-group markers. However, this is understandable given the context. The participant was in a situation wherein their personal space was unexpectedly infringed upon. Not only was the situation uncomfortable by normal interaction standards, in most cases the participant did not know the transgressing experimenter. Thus, it would not be their first instinct to say, "Hey buddy, what's up?" or a phrase of similar meaning. The participant and the experimenter would not have been on that relational level, nor would the participant be eager to get to know the experimenter to that point.

Negative politeness

We found that four participants, 3 male and 1 female, used negative politeness. These participants were hesitant yet direct about addressing the situation while refraining from imposing themselves on the experimenter. The four students used the strategy in different ways, as one male participant said, "Hey don't want to be mean. I can move somewhere else," while another said, "I could move." In addition, the third male participant said, "Excuse me, I'm just going to take my stuff." The female student said, "Excuse me, if you want to sit here, I'll log off the computer." While the actual text of what was said varied across the different situations, the intent of the response was the same. All four participants alerted the experimenter to the situation, but gave her the option to stay in her space as the participant moved and inconvenienced themselves. This combination of direct confrontation and a desire not impose is what categorizes the responses as negative politeness.

Off-record politeness

In this section, we will be referring to Table 2, which highlights responses from participants under the category of off-record politeness. References to a certain response will be made under the template: M/F: 1-7, where M stands for the male response and F stands for the female response. The numerals following the colon highlight the selected response(s) being referenced in the following discussion.

Out of the eleven examples given above, one observes that seven responses (M: 2-6; F: 1-2) began with the phrase, "Excuse me." When this phrase was used by the participant, it was for the purpose of gaining the attention of the experimenter seated in their place (Reiter and Dale, 2000). In addition, M: 2-6 and F: 1-2, and 4 contain phrases such as "my stuff," "my laptop," or "my seat." These phrases assume that the objects under the ambiguous idea of "stuff" belong to the participant, and thus, the experimenter was at fault for being in close proximity to the "stuff." As a result, the experimenter is expected to leave. Although these phrases do not explicitly state the participant's intentions, they imply that the experimenter has trespassed on their

personal space.

Concerning F: 3, the participant's statement again evokes the idea of ownership; however, the apology is neither an attention grabber nor a real apology at all. Rather, it remains to show the experimenter that there is something amiss in the environment, and the participant seeks to show the experimenter the error. The other unique male response was M: 1. Here, the question does not assume a prior use of the seat by the participant, but from the question, one might conclude that the questioner might desire to occupy that particular seat. He conceals the irregularity of the situation by asking a question that highlights his preference for a particular seat in the library. With regards to F: 4, the prompt of the participant underscores the knowledge of this experiment, but her request for the experimenter to leave is devoid of any explicit imperative. She follows the same *modus operandi* as those who claim ownership of the aforementioned "stuff": the experimenter has encroached on objects that belong to the participant and is now expected to leave.

Anomalies

With regards to anomalies, three out of the six participants said, "Sorry." Their response could be interpreted as the participant seeing the experimenter but not knowing how to handle the situation. A similar deduction could follow for one participant who just said, "Hi" and the other who said, "Hi, sorry." They could have assumed that by leaving the table empty, an individual taking their seat was not an offense, since it was a public setting. Another notion could be that initially, they wanted to employ a politeness strategy but refrained from doing so in order to avoid any conflict. These assumptions appear to be probable and none of these are in the likeness of a politeness strategy. As a result, due to multiple interpretations, one cannot ascribe a politeness strategy to these interactions, and thus, they are anomalies. With regards to the participant who did not say a word, we were unable to discern any politeness strategy used. Since we analyzed our responses solely based on the words uttered, such a response is an anomaly.

Conclusion

Brown and Levinson (1987) define face to be the public perception of an individual. Our speech acts can threaten this perception. As a result, this perception may swing from one end of the social sphere to the other. One day a person could be adored by all, and then the next be shunned. Thus, our speech acts, especially in potentially harmful situations, should be concerned with self-preservation. In our findings, when our participants were placed in an unexpected situation, they employed various politeness strategies in order to mitigate the problem. This was done in such a manner to preserve their face. We found that when our participants were placed in a situation where their seat was taken by another individual, they employed various politeness strategies in response. Although the experimenter was wrong to have occupied their seat, participants did not ask her to leave in the direct manner that defines the bald-on record approach. Rather, participants used other strategies to cloak their response. By asking the experimenter if they should move to a different seat, some participants employed negative politeness. Those who used off-record often hinted at their inconvenience with the experimenter by informing her of the presence of their belongings. This information assumes an infringement upon their property by the experimenter, insinuating that she is unwelcome. In addition, there were those who refrained from saying anything that would indicate a certain politeness strategy.

Politeness strategies may be understood as stereotypically masculine or feminine by the public sphere. Direct statements used in bald-on record may be interpreted as masculine while those that are indirect, as in the case of off-record politeness, may be deemed as feminine. Our results showed that none of our participants employed the bald-on record approach, while a majority was found to use off-record and negative politeness. This observation follows Mill's (2005) beliefs considering the influence of the public sphere in an individual's use of politeness strategies. While our results agreed with the majority of our expectations, one that is of interest is that there was no significant gender based difference in the politeness strategies employed. Rather, our study showed that male and female participants responded almost equally across all categories. This conflicts with Schumann and Ross's (2010) experiment, which found that there was a gender difference in how people respond in a dispute. A possible reason for this lack of difference may not lie in the realm of negative politeness or in the analysis of Schumann and Ross, but in one who questions Brown and Levinson's work.

Yabuuchi (2006) believes that attributes such as autonomy, fellowship, and hierarchy should form the system of politeness along with those stated by Brown and Levinson (1987). He introduces the concept of a deference politeness system, in which the individuals involved are of the same social position. Due to this lack of hierarchy, they are more independent with their desires. In a college library, the students possess the same social position; they are among the myriad of other people who use the library's resources in order to fulfill their objectives. Due to this equality, one's gender does not affect them in making an apology to another individual.

Limitations

As explained with the bald-on record politeness strategy, the female participants exhibited the same directness towards the experimenter as the male participants. This may have been due to the fact that the transgressing experimenter was also a woman. In order to account for this influence on the data, we could have made a male experimenter sit at the table of these participants and analyze whether there would be a change in the executed politeness strategy. Another limitation that we encountered was complete anonymity. Since the researchers attend the school at which the study was conducted, they ran into a few trials wherein the participant recognized the experimenter in their seat. While the researchers took great care to ensure that they did not recognize their participants at first sight, such trials were ultimately unavoidable. If the experimenters did not get to see the participant before taking their spot, there was no way to ensure that they did not know who the participant was. This could have influenced the response the experimenters received, due to the possibility that the participant may have viewed the experimenter as an acquaintance rather than a stranger, and thus reacted to the circumstances more comfortably. Since he or she still had no prior knowledge that a study was being conducted, their response was still relevant to the experiment. Thus, while this experiment successfully endeavored to measure degrees of politeness within the context of an awkward situation, it is true that if we had endeavored to design the experiment more efficiently or on a larger scale, some of our results may have been affected by it.

Implications of Study

The results from this study can be applied to a wider context in a variety of ways. The discovery that several women and men both reacted with a politeness technique shows that, when faced with an uncomfortable situation, many still attempt to be polite.

While the responses varied in degrees of directness in ways that differed from our hypotheses, they nonetheless merit future research. Future research could answer the following questions: How far does the inclination to be polite extend? Is there a certain barrier that must be crossed in order for a person to respond differently? Another interesting context to study in the future would be age. The age range of the participants (18-22 years) insinuates that they may have more confidence when approaching someone their age, as opposed to a younger or older person. Thus, if a similar study were to be conducted with three confederates of different ages targeting college-age students, one may gather different results. Nonetheless, what we can take away from this study is that politeness cannot be attributed to a particular gender. Instead, the strategy that is enforced will mostly depend on the contexts in which people find themselves.

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Appendix A Chart for Classification of Responses

Participant # ____

Date :

						Words Said
Bald On Record Politeness	Positive Politeness	Negative Politeness	Off the Record Politeness	Anomalies		

Appendix B

Independent Project Follow-up Interview

Demographics:

Which sex are you? (Check one) _____ Male _____ Female

Interview:

1. When you realized that the experimenter was in your seat, how did you initially want to handle the situation?
2. Did you consider saying anything other than what you did? If so, what? Why didn't you say that rather than what you said?

Teaching Wave Theory in Historical Linguistics

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During my first two years as a linguistics major, every course began with the following disclaimer: There is no bright line between a language and a dialect. But upon starting Historical Linguistics, I was told to learn the traditional family tree showing the evolution of West Germanic. This tree represents the type of diagram used by Stammbaum Theory (ST). Like syntactic trees, ST trees are devoid of grey areas and dialect continua. Only near the end of the course did the professor introduce wave diagrams, the lesser-known alternative to language family trees. Wave diagrams, which represent Wave Theory (WT), reflect my understanding of language much more accurately than trees, which represent Stammbaum Theory (Hogg, 2002). WT uses overlapping circles, reminiscent of Venn diagrams, to indicate which features of a given dialect overlap with those of another, and to what degree (Hogg, 2002). This essay briefly explains why I believe ST is an insufficient way of representing linguistic relationships, particularly regarding the West Germanic group of dialects, and posits WT as a superior model. I hope it will help raise awareness of this valuable alternative theory among professors and students of historical linguistics.

The peculiarity of West Germanic is that borrowing has taken place abundantly among its dialects. Take for instance the Germanic dedicated reflexive pronoun. (Many Germanic dialects have a pronoun that can only be used reflexively and that does not inflect for person, number or gender (Robinson, 1992)). It is found throughout Old East and North Germanic, but within West Germanic it is found only in Old High German and Old Low Franconian (Robinson, 1992). If this pronoun were found only in the North and East, ST would have no trouble accurately representing the situation. However, its presence in only two dialects of West Germanic cannot be shown by a traditionally interpreted tree diagram. This is because trees ignore the ostensive fact that the dialects within West Germanic are so varied that they hardly constitute a concrete dialect group. ST relies on exactly this kind of hard boundary, when in reality there often isn't one. Hence, WT avoids the false binary distinctions necessitated by ST.

Two problems with ST are identified by Richard Hogg (2002). First, he observes that ST is fatally inflexible when any single tree diagram is in question. That is, it lumps linguistic groups like West Germanic into a monolithic entity, belying the large amounts of variation therein (Hogg, 2002). Additionally, ST is open to greatly differing interpretations and so can be construed to show almost any relationship between dialects (Hogg, 2002). Based solely on a single feature, a tree diagram might be drawn that accurately represents the situation for that feature, but not for the majority of features. In other words, this diagram will not be useful for grouping the varieties with regard to anything other than the sole feature used. This highlights the fundamental difference between ST and WT: ST takes a top-down approach, while WT takes a bottom-up approach. The focus of ST is on the classification of the varieties in question *assuming such discrete varieties exist*, while the focus of WT is simply on describing where certain features are present and where they are not.

To summarize: ST requires binary splits, while WT allows for a nuanced, analog representation of dialects as continua. Of course, most linguists believe the latter is the most accurate way to model language in its native environment of human society. This enables WT to better reflect the complex situation in West Germanic. The fatal flaw Hogg (2002) finds with ST is that the categories it creates simply do not reflect the ostensive linguistic reality of dialects in contact, regardless of geographical location.

ST misrepresents dialects in general by oversimplifying a complex situation of linguistic contact into discrete, neatly diverging entities. The descriptive precision of WT is necessary to accurately represent linguistic situations. WT also helps teach students to view dialects as real, as existing and changing in idiosyncratic ways that defy easy categorization. For these reasons, the field of historical linguistics in general would benefit from a greater emphasis on WT in the classroom.

References

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