

HOW TO ASK A PROFESSOR

POLITENESS IN CZECH ACADEMIC CULTURE

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KAROLINUM

How to ask a professor

Politeness in Czech academic culture

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CONTENTS

Introduction ---- 7

1. POLITENESS IN LANGUAGE ---- 9

1.1 Searching for a politeness definition ---- 10

1.2 Approaches to (linguistic) politeness ---- 13

1.2.1 Face and facework ---- 14

1.2.2 Conversational and politeness maxims ---- 17

1.2.3 Discursive approach to politeness ---- 18

1.3 How laypersons in the Czech republic define politeness ---- 19

1.4 Impoliteness in language ---- 21

1.5 Function of politeness in society ---- 22

2. POLITENESS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC ---- 25

2.1 Standard and common Czech ---- 26

2.2 Pronominal addressing ---- 27

2.3 T- and V-forms in academic settings ---- 29

2.4 Nominal addressing ---- 30

2.5 Nominal addressing in academic settings ---- 34

2.6 Requests in Czech ---- 37

**3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION
IN INSTITUTIONAL SETTINGS ---- 41**

4. ANALYSIS OF REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION SENT TO FACULTY ---- 47

4.1 E-mail requests for information ---- 49

4.1.1 Data ---- 49

4.1.2 Methodology and procedures ---- 50

4.1.3 Results ---- 55

4.1.3.1 Addressing and establishing contact in e-mail requests for information ---- 55

4.1.3.2 Level of directness in e-mail requests for information ---- 57

4.1.3.3 Syntactic downgraders in e-mail requests for information ---- 61

4.1.3.4 Lexical and phrasal downgraders and upgraders in e-mail requests for information ---- 62

4.1.3.5 Supportive and aggravating moves in e-mail requests for information ---- 64

4.1.3.6 Substandard elements in e-mail requests for information ---- 71

4.1.4 Discussion ---- 72

4.2	Requests for information in students' information forum ----	76
4.2.1	Data ----	76
4.2.2	Methodology and procedures ----	78
4.2.3	Results ----	78
4.2.3.1	Establishing contact in requests for information on students' information forum ----	78
4.2.3.2	Level of directness in requests for information on students' information forum ----	79
4.2.3.3	Syntactic downgraders in requests for information on students' information forum ----	84
4.2.3.4	Lexical and phrasal downgraders and upgraders in requests for information on students' information forum ----	86
4.2.3.5	Supportive and aggravating moves in requests for information on students' information forum ----	88
4.2.3.6	Substandard elements in requests for information on students' information forum ----	92
4.2.4	Discussion ----	93

5. GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS ---- 97

RESUMÉ ---- 103

LIST OF TABLES ---- 107

REFERENCES ---- 109

AUTHOR INDEX ---- 117

SUBJECT INDEX ---- 121

INTRODUCTION

The objective of the publication being presented is to introduce to the readers the communicative strategies that Czech university students choose when in contact with their lecturers and professors. The institutional communication in Czech universities has its specifics – on the one hand, it conserves traditional manners of communication, as the university is an institution with considerable hierarchy, and many interactions follow formal rules (e.g., how to address the professor in an official letter or during the degree ceremony); on the other hand, students as speakers of the younger generation bring new phenomena into the communication. Students whose communications have been analysed have undergone the process of enculturation and socialization since 1989 when, in the former Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution brought an end to the Communist era after a span of 40 years and Czech culture started to be influenced by Western countries. Younger speakers who often travel abroad to spend some time in foreign countries during their studies bring new communication schemes; therefore, permanent changes occur. Czech linguist Vilém Mathesius (1932) used the term *pružná stabilita* (flexible stability), which means that language can develop only as fast as to enable consecutive generations to understand each other. However, this publication is not about language in the sense of the Saussurean term *langue* but in the sense of *parole* (Saussure, 1916). Therefore, communicative strategies can develop only as fast as to enable consecutive generations not to threaten each other's fate; this term, first authored by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), will be referred to in many contexts in this book.

In the first chapter, I will consider the function of politeness in human society and a possible definition of politeness as presented by Czech scholars and by Czech laypeople – university students – with regard to how they perceive politeness and how they define polite behaviour. My aim is not to revise any main theories on politeness or to point out their weaknesses, as that has been done many times before (for a comprehensive critical look, see, for example, Eelen, 2001). On the contrary, I will concentrate on the students' approach to politeness, which could be interpreted as a laypersons' approach. It shows that their perception of politeness differs significantly from those

presented by linguists. Throughout the book, I will try to find the possible reasons for this discrepancy.

In chapter two, I will take into consideration many of the aspects of Czech culture that could manifest themselves within verbal politeness. I present the results of several Czech studies oriented at pronominal and nominal addressing in the Czech Republic in general and especially in academic settings; some of them describe real communicative situations and are based on authentic material, and the others present students' preferences and are based on questionnaires or discourse completion tasks. Again, it shows that there is a difference between the real state of usage and the ideal state from the students' point of view, which suggests that a change in communicative scheme is imminent.

Chapter three focuses on the previous research on computer mediated communication in academic settings. The main part of the publication (chapter four) presents the research oriented on requests for information addressed to faculty by Czech students. The first part of the research focuses on analysis of requests for information in students' e-mails addressed to a university lecturer; 240 authentic e-mail requests for information were analysed. The requests were related to, for example, the schedule of the courses and examinations, dates of consultations, themes of diploma theses, questions as to whether the lecturer had already received a seminar paper and/or if its academic level was considered appropriate, and which grade the student received on a test. The second part of the analysis focuses on requests for information posted on the student information Internet forum SIS helpdesk, which is an internet service offered by the faculty. Members of the academic staff, students' affairs department administrators and central schedule planners answer the questions that students post on the internet forum. Students ask how to solve problems with schedules and enrolling in courses. 260 initial contributions containing requests for information were examined.

To analyse both types of requests for information, the coding scheme that was developed for the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project / CCSARP (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), which largely builds on Edmondson's and House's work (Edmondson, 1981; Edmondson and House, 1981), was used. The introductory part of the request (establishing contact, forms of address, greetings), level of directness of the head act (the minimal unit that can realise a request), lexical and phrasal modification of the head act and syntactic modification of the head act were analysed.

Additionally, supportive moves, external modifications that are not included in the head act, were taken into consideration. Among the supportive moves that occurred were, for example, thanks, promises, grounders, final greetings and phatic elements. The results have been compared to the findings of other studies oriented towards verbal politeness, and some tentative conclusions about the strategies that may be preferred by university students in the Czech Republic have been drawn.

1. POLITENESS IN LANGUAGE

1.1 SEARCHING FOR A POLITENESS DEFINITION

Over the past 30 years, the need to differentiate between the concept of politeness modelled by linguists on an abstract level (politeness₁) and a layperson's concept of politeness (politeness₂) tending to be evaluative, has become evident. "There can be no idealised, universal scientific concept of (im)politeness (i.e., (im)politeness₂) which can be applied to instances of social interaction across cultures, subcultures and languages" (Watts, 2003: 23). Language users evaluate as polite those utterances that correspond with their own experiences and notion of politeness. The utterance that is considered polite may not always be evaluated positively at the same time; many language users consider (formal) politeness to be manipulative, snobbish, insincere, and/or too formal. Moreover, every interactant evaluates a particular utterance in its particular context. It is now widely acknowledged that an utterance cannot be inherently polite or impolite; its evaluation is always context dependent. Classic theories of politeness mostly stress the illocution of the utterance; the speaker's intent is the most important factor – e.g., whether the speaker follows the politeness maxims, chooses a conventionally indirect strategy, chooses an appropriate form of addressing, etc. Recently, the perlocutionary effect has also started to be taken into consideration; a recipient's evaluation is crucial in evaluating the utterance as polite or impolite. Terkourafi presents "a situation where a female shopper is browsing items in a shop and is interpreted by other shoppers as making ways for them to pass. She had no intention to be polite to anyone, yet her behaviour was positively evaluated by them as evidenced by their thanking her for it" (Terkourafi, 2008: 58). It shows that the point of view of the producer and recipient may not be equivalent.

Classic politeness definitions take politeness as a means to avoid conflict, minimise antagonism, and lessen tension and aggression in interactions:

"Politeness is a strategic conflict avoidance" (Leech, 1980: 19).

"The strategies available to interactants to defuse the danger and to minimise the antagonism" (Kasper, 1990: 194).

“Politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff, 1975: 64).

“Politeness is a complex system for softening face-threatening acts” (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987)¹.

In accordance with Brown and Levinson’s classical approach, Czech linguist M. Švehlová sees human interaction as a possible threat, and politeness is seen as a protection against aggression:

“Problémem každé sociální skupiny je kontrolovat vnitřní agresi... V mezilidské interakci je to právě zdvořilostní princip, který onu potenciální možnost agrese dovoluje ‘odzbrojit’, a to řečovými strategiemi, jejichž fungování umožňuje interakci mezi lidmi (skupinami, národy) potenciálně agresivními” (Švehlová, 1994: 39–40).

“The problem of every social group is to control aggression... In human interaction it is the politeness principle which allows to ‘disarm’ the aggression through speech strategies whose functioning makes possible the interaction between people (groups, nations) potentially aggressive.” (Translated by P. Ch.)

Alternately, politeness can be seen from a positive point of view as a means of constituting and maintaining good relations and a friendly atmosphere between interactants. Arndt and Janney (1985: 282) talk about “interpersonal supportiveness.” Sifianou (1992: 86) defines politeness as “the set of social values which instructs interactants to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations.” Hill et al. (1986: 349) view politeness as “one of the constraints on human interaction, whose purpose is to consider others’ feelings, establish levels of mutual comfort and promote rapport.”² An elaborate definition of politeness in this sense is proposed by Czech linguist S. Válková (2004: 38):

“Linguistic politeness is a partly routinized and partly creative language manifestation of social values, finding its way of reflection at various levels of language representation (phonic, grammatical, lexical, textual, etc.) and reflecting interactional strategies by which interactants signal their interpersonal supportiveness, i.e., their intention to consider each other and satisfy shared expectations about cultural and situational assumption in order to avoid or at least soften face-threatening acts, to create happy conditions for interaction and to avoid losing one’s face.”

1 Definitions cited also in Watts (2003: 50–52) or <http://research.shu.ac.uk/politeness/defining.html>.

2 Definitions cited also in Watts (2003: 50–52) or <http://research.shu.ac.uk/politeness/defining.html>.

Czech linguist D. Zítková combines both approaches:

“Zdvořilost lze obecně vymezit z negativního úhlu pohledu (tzn. jako prostředek mající za cíl zabránit konfliktům a rovněž kontrolovat a omezovat potenciální agresi komunikantů) i z pozitivního úhlu pohledu (tj. jako prostředek podporující udržení dobrých vztahů a přátelské atmosféry mezi komunikanty)” (Zítková, 2008: 47).

“Politeness can be defined from a negative point of view (as a means to avoid conflict and reduce potential aggression between interactants) and also from a positive point of view (as a means to maintain good relationships and friendly atmosphere between interactants.” (Translated by P. Ch.)

In the following definition proposed by the Czech linguist F. Čermák, the notion of deference, which is important in Czech culture, is stressed:

“Zdvořilost je konvenční sociální postoj a projev úcty a takové chování, které je přijatelné a nekonfliktní a které má v jazyce různé vyjádření” (Čermák, 1997: 402).

“Politeness is a conventional social attitude and expression of deference and such a behaviour which is acceptable and non-conflicting a which has various manifestations in the language.” (Translated by P. Ch.)

Some linguists primarily focus on linguistic realisation of utterances:

“Language usage associated with smooth communication” (Ide, 1989: 225).

“Zdvořilost se v lingvistice rozumí v užším smyslu formy a funkce oslovení, pozdravů, tykání a vykání, v širším smyslu aktualizované užití zvláště gramatických a lexikálních prostředků, např. negace, slovesného způsobu a vidu, determinace, deminutiv, modálních sloves, částic atd. Užívá se termínu řečová etiketa” (Karlík, Pleskalová and Nekula, 2002).

“Politeness in linguistics means in a narrow sense forms and functions of address, greetings, T and V-forms, in broader sense actual usage of grammatical and lexical means, e.g., negation, verbal mood and aspect, determination, diminutives, modal verbs, particles etc. The term linguistic etiquette is also used.” (Translated by P. Ch.)

“Zdvořilost je soubor řečových strategií, způsobů užívání jazyka, které jako svůj hlavní cíl mají nejen bezproblémovou komunikaci, ale zejména seberealizaci a sebeobranu komunikujícího individua v interakci s jinými komunikanty” (Hirschová, 2006: 171).

“Politeness is a set of speech strategies, ways of using language whose main objective is not only the incident-free communication, but above all