THE EVOLUTION OF IM/POLITENESS

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Im/politeness is a fundamental feature of human language and communication. However, there is hardly any research on the evolution of im/politeness and the cognitive and social factors underlying its emergence. In this paper we argue that the evolution of politic, polite, as well as impolite behaviour is an important research question for language evolution research. We investigate the evolutionary foundations of im/politeness, present an evolutionary model of the emergence of im/politeness and discuss the evolutionary functions of im/politeness. In this way, we illustrate that investigating im/politeness from an evolutionary perspective can make significant contributions to our understanding of the evolution of pragmatic competencies, language, and also im/politeness research in general.

1. Introduction

There has been a growing consensus that the dimension of pragmatics is of fundamental importance to accounts of language evolution and has not been addressed in enough detail so far (e.g. Scott-Phillips 2014: 141; Tomasello 2008; Wacewicz, Żywiczyński, & McCrohon 2014: 82). Among this growing number of researchers investigating the evolution of pragmatics, Żywiczyński (2012) and Wacewicz et al. (2014) have stressed the central role of politeness in pragmatics and language use and have drawn attention to the importance of studying politeness from an evolutionary-ethological perspective. In addition, Wacewicz et al. (2014: 92) also mention impoliteness as an important topic for language evolution research in its own right. Among im/politeness researchers, Leech (2014: 26) has posed the question "How has the evolution of politeness – so widely observed in human societies and languages – come about?" and identified it as a key component of an explanation of politeness. Im/politeness researchers

so far have paid little to no attention to the question of the evolution of im/politeness, however.

In this paper, we will make a contribution towards this important research question. We take as our point of departure the consensus in pragmatics research that im/politeness is a fundamental and universal feature of language use that is present in all interactions (e.g. Sell 2005: 114-115). Moreover, one of the problems of previous discussions of the evolution of politeness is that they treated politeness and impoliteness as distinct phenomena. However, here we adopt an integrated model that sees politic, polite and impolite behaviour as scalar (see Watts 2003) and based on the same cognitive and evolutionary foundations. In this way, we will sketch an integrated evolutionary account of the foundations, emergence, and functions of im/politeness in language.

2. Cognitive and Evolutionary Foundations of Im/Politeness

From a cognitive perspective an understanding of im/politeness is based on a number of sociocognitive skills that allow humans to negotiate and coordinate social relations in interactive contexts in a given speech community. Like other coordinative and collaborative interactive skills it rests on the *shared intentionality infrastructure* (Tomasello 2008), that is the ability to attend jointly to something with others and have shared goals, intentions, and a common ground that underlies the negotiation of a shared perspective on a situation. These skills arise quite early and a nascent understanding of joint attentional states and others' perspectives is evident even in prelinguistic infants (Tomasello 2008). These capacities lay the groundwork for an emerging understanding of politic and im/polite behaviour as based on conventions and social perspectives. In addition, children have a high motivation to align themselves with others, be like, and cooperate with them (Tomasello 2009, 2014). This represents another important foundation for acquiring and internalizing politic and im/politeness triggers. In the process of socialisation, children acquire a concept of other interactants' social face and face needs (Leech 2014: 26). This process also depends on the capacities for cooperation, alignment, perspective-taking and the emerging capacity for Theory of Mind – that is the capacity to attribute complex mental states to others. However, the acquisition of im/politeness is not only tied to these kinds of interactional perspective-taking and cooperative proclivities. Crucially, they rest on an understanding of conventions and normativity that is operative in cooperative contexts (cf. Wacewicz et al. 2014).

Tomasello (2014: 144) proposes that before age three, young children's social cognition operates on a second-personal, interactive mode, and that "they

do not fully understand how such things as language, artifacts, and social norms work as conventional creations" based on group-agreement. This mode is termed *joint intentionality* by Tomasello. For an understanding of conventions, norms, and in turn also for an understanding of im/politeness, children need to develop what Tomasello calls c*ollective intentionality*, an understanding that conventions are based on collective agreements that guide and coordinate normative behaviour. As Tomasello argues, this understanding starts developing around children's third birthday and is evident in a number of behaviours, for example in their concern for how they are socially evaluated by others, their active management of impressions they make on others, and especially their enforcement of "social norms on others even when they are not personally involved or affected in any way, often using normative language about what one should or should not do in general" (Tomasello 2014: 87; cf. Haun & Tomasello 2011; Rakoczy, Warneken & Tomasello 2008; Schmidt & Tomasello 2012).

From an evolutionary perspective, it is interesting that chimpanzees do not enforce and monitor norms in this way and do not punish others for acts that are not done to them directly (Tomasello 2014: 75; Riedl, Jensen, Call & Tomasello 2012). In contrast to preschool children, chimpanzees are also not very interested in what impression they make on others (Engelmann, Herrmann & Tomasello 2012) and do not show a bias for conformity as children do (Tomasello 2014: 75; Haun, Rekers & Tomasello 2014). Politic behaviour and im/politeness as a social activity also depend on such judgements and understandings of normative standards. Thus, the capacities mentioned above represent the cognitive and evolutionary foundations not only of normative cognition, but also for the ontogenetic and phylogenetic emergence of understanding politic behavior and im/politeness.

3. An Evolutionary Model of Im/Politeness

As was shown in the previous section, certain cognitive and evolutionary foundations of language must therefore be present as a basis for pragmatic language use.

But what exactly are the minimal requirements for the evolution of an im/politeness-ready brain and for individuals to communicate in an im/polite manner? We argue that this requires three concepts: 1) face, "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic!] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular interaction" (Goffman 1967: 5); 2) norms of behaviour, based on sociocognitive skills such as perspective-taking, an understanding of normativity, Theory of Mind and collective intentionality; and

3) protolinguistic capacities for meaning construal enabling flexible and intentional use of meaningful items in interactive contexts.

Face in Goffman's view is an individual as well as a group phenomenon, as it is on loan, accepted and perpetuated during a given interaction. There are two prerequisites for individuals to express and maintain face: First, a mutual understanding that the other has a face and is an intentional being, as expressed in the sociocognitive infrastructure underlying shared intentionality and perspective-taking. Second, the acceptance of face as being in operation in an interaction is a prerequisite to successful communication (Goffman 1967). While face, as well as holding and expressing im/polite beliefs, seems to be universal, its constituents and characteristics can and do vary in particular cultures and contexts (see e.g. Matsumoto 1988; Culpeper et al. 2010, 2014).

Humans are group-minded beings, and as such "come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations-in short, practices emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). Within these communities of practice and in the group's common ground, emerging linguistic conventions of performing and evaluating social roles are shared and become normatively grounded in a community standard (Tomasello 2014: 92; 114). Current research widely accepts that interactants' behaviour is evaluated according to these interactional norms (Eelen 2001: 42–43); this ties into the social norm view of politeness (Fraser 1990: 220).

For the development of pragmatic competence, this means that within the community, a set of linguistic means is developed which speakers use to express the appropriate behaviour as per the community standard. This default behaviour which abides by the Conversational Contract (Fraser & Nolen 1981; Fraser 1990) is unmarked and likely goes unnoticed. As such, it is likely to have developed first and to have been conventionalised quicker.

Any behaviour that goes beyond this appropriate or 'politic' (Watts 2003) behaviour is salient. Depending on usage, it can be positively or negatively marked and thus be open for an interpretation as im/polite (see Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Culpeper 2011, Locher & Bousfield 2008). Some of these salient behaviours are selected more often in certain contexts. For impoliteness, for instance, these are contexts in which negative emotions or negative consequences occur, and contextual expectations are infringed upon (see Culpeper 2011: 23). As these behaviours are commonly selected in negatively marked contexts, they become conventionalised. A knowledge of these (non-) conventionalised im/politeness triggers (Culpeper 2015) forms an integral part of the pragmatic competence of a particular language user.

Children acquire these preexisting representational systems and abstract them from instances of actual im/polite and politic language use in context (Tomasello 2014. 139); these systems become part of the individual speaker's habitus (Bourdieu 1991) and are passed on to and stabilised in further generations. These systems are thus subject to cultural transmission and historical development within the communities of practice they are embedded in (Mesoudi 2011). For this reason, evaluations of behaviours as politic or im/polite can change markedly over time and can vary strongly in different cultures (Nevala 2010).

As both impoliteness and politeness rely on the same cognitive mechanisms, they should not be treated as two distinct phenomena, but as the two end points of a scale. An integrated model of im/politeness that includes a notion of a default or politic/appropriate behaviour therefore better captures this understanding of im/politeness as scalar (see Watts 2003). On the positively marked end of the spectrum, politeness is behaviour that caters to the other's face. If the line the speaker takes during an interaction is accepted or boosted, she will feel good and wish to perpetuate this line in further interactions. Similarly, she will choose triggers to support the hearer's face, as both are mutually aware that face loss will lead to negative emotions (e.g. shame, confusion, anger). On the other, negatively marked end, impoliteness constitutes "behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context" (Bousfield & Locher 2008: 3), or is understood by the target to be in disregard of face concerns. As such, it comprises any behaviour that violates contextual norms, is evaluated negatively, and has negative consequences for at least one participant (cf. Culpeper 2011: 23).

Im/politeness is thus a universal feature of human communication. The expression of im/politeness, however, and the number and characteristics of im/politeness triggers are specific to culture and context, as well as to specific points in time (see e.g. Ide 1989; Sell 2005).

4. The Evolutionary Function of Im/Politeness

Once a community standard of doing im/politeness and catering to face has been established, it can be used for various interpersonal goals, e.g. to gain praise, or attain a better social position (Goffman 1967: 24).

Speakers use their capacities for joint attention and joint goal formation to create and share perspectives which have to be negotiated in the group (Tomasello 2014: 3). Im/politeness is tied to this negotiation process of social roles in that it offers ways of establishing and negotiating perspectives on the

social standing of participants in social situations. Thus it is a way of coordinating perspectives and social relations in a collective intentionality context. As such it forms a basis for "more abstract cultural practices" that are "structured – indeed, created – by agreed-upon social conventions and norms" (Tomasello 2014: 3; see Tomasello 2009).

Leech (2014: 27) suggests that from an evolutionary perspective "politeness, building on empathy [...] and theory of mind [...], is one of the forms of reciprocity" that enable humans to live in stable and cohesive societies. In showing concern for the face, wants and rights of each individual, members of a group can use politeness to attain and maintain group coherence. Meeting the face needs of an individual thus has immediate benefits in terms of group cohesion, group survival, and individual fitness. This proposal ties in with theories that discuss the evolution of language in the context of maintaining and managing group cohesion and social relations (e.g. Dunbar 2003). Politeness also offers ways of reputation management. As long as the line the speaker has taken is accepted and boosted over multiple interactions, politeness helps secure one's social standing within the group, contributing to the establishment and protection of a stable group hierarchy.

Impoliteness, on the other hand, should not be conceptualised as a handicap or failed politeness, since it can be used intentionally as a means to achieve individual goals (Sell 2005: 115-116). For a protolinguistic community, two ways of using impoliteness are of interest.

First, a producer uses a coercive action that clashes with the target's interests or restricts the target to gain benefits or reinforce existing ones (Culpeper 2011: 226-227); this so-called coercive impoliteness can be used to reduce the target's symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) by infringing upon their Equity Rights (Spencer-Oatey 2002) or negative face. So for instance "[I]n aggressive utterances the winner [...] demonstrates that as interactant he can handle himself better than his adversaries" (Goffman 1967: 25). The producer thus uses impoliteness in situations of power imbalance to gain (social) benefits, e.g. to appear powerful by insulting the target, to get power over actions, or to get power in conversation, for instance by managing the floor. In early human evolution, such capacities were certainly integral for an individual's fitness within social structures characterized by a high degree of collaboration, cooperation, but also competition and social negotiation.

A second, different form of impoliteness might even predate coercive use. This "affective impoliteness is the targeted display of heightened emotion, typically anger, with the implication that the target is to blame for producing that negative emotional state" (Culpeper 2011: 223). Impoliteness is expressed

purposefully to harm a target who hurt the speaker (or her self-esteem). It is thus used to manage speaker aggression and express one's own perspective on the behaviour of a target (an individual or group), situation or event. Hence it can be used to manage in-groups and out-groups. For instance, impolite beliefs can be expressed with the aim of excluding the target from the in-group; further, a group of individuals can be construed as other, i.e. an out-group who lacks participation rights in the in-group community. For the in-group, this might entail evolutionary benefits, e.g. when resources are sparse. Attacks on and loss of face can have severe consequences such as loss of social status and ostracism. These in turn can have significant detrimental effects on evolutionary fitness. The evolutionary importance and fragility of face in the social domain is also underscored by the close tie between central behaviour-motivating emotive categories such as joy, surprise, anger and sadness on the one hand, and im/politeness and rapport management on the other (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 116).

Overall, then, politeness and impoliteness are ways of taking, setting, and sharing perspectives. In particular, they function as attempts to coordinate and create views of an interlocutor's face, as well as attempts to manage group coherence and group membership. As such, im/politeness is an integral mechanism involved in the development of culture, which is essentially a process of social coordination (Tomasello 2014).

5. Conclusion

On the basis of research into the evolution of language, group mindedness, and shared intentionality we proposed prerequisites for an im/politeness-ready brain: concern for interactants' face, a shared set of norms, and capacities underlying the goal-directed use of proto-linguistic items in the context of social coordination. We used this as a basis for an evolutionary model of im/politeness with an emerging standard default politic mode of interaction and conventionalised ways of using im/politeness triggers. The model is coherent with one proposed in current im/politeness research and the ways in which modern speakers negotiate im/politeness in interaction. While triggers differ in each community, the expression of im/politeness is unique to all human societies. Early forms of politic and im/polite behaviour had evolutionary benefits for protolinguistic hominins in terms of the maintenance and management of growing groups and social hierarchy, as well as group and individual benefits. On this view, impoliteness is not a handicap or a failure to do politeness, but an important feature in the evolution of pragmatics and language in its own right that deserves further scientific exploration.

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