The present paper deals with the well-known phenomenon of politeness, but from a different perspective, that of the speaker’s face. The major aim of the paper is to reveal that dominant theories of politeness are other-oriented (to the hearer) and underestimate the needs of the speaker in communication. In order to explore the overlooked position of the speaker’s face in interaction, I examine compliment responses arguing that the motivation for the acceptance of the compliment (self-praise) or the rejection of it (face-threatening for the hearer’s face) seems to be the speaker’s needs and not the protection of the hearer. On a second level, I explore how gender is (or is not) involved in the protection of the speaker’s face by taking into account the fact that gender is a dynamic category which is constructed and reconstructed through language.

1 INTRODUCTION

Research on politeness matters, in an attempt to reveal the systematization of interaction through the formulation of rules, has focused on the exploration of ‘politeness’ with regard to others. Although this other-oriented approach, which depends almost exclusively on the hearer, gives us stable models of politeness, it underestimates to a high degree the facture of politeness in correlation with the speaking subject. What is in fact underestimated is the potentiality of the speaker to operate in a non-conciliative way within interaction, guided mainly by his own plans which are a result of his own personal needs.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the phenomenon of politeness from the angle of the speaking subject, by emphasizing to the overlooked aspect of the protection of his own face. Assuming that, in order to achieve smooth communication, interactants have to avoid conflicts between them, we claim that a way of doing so is to ensure the balance between the goals and the expectations both of the speaker and the addressee.

2 STUDIES ON POLITENESS

Ruling from the above assumption of the balanced goals and expectations of interactants, I will explore this lack of interest towards the speaker’s needs in some major approaches to politeness.

Beginning from the definition of ‘politeness’ by Lakoff, who is considered ‘the mother of modern politeness theory’ (Eelen 2001:2), we observe that she defines politeness as ‘a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange’ (Lakoff 1990:34). Considering the minimum conflict and confrontation for all participants in interaction, we would expect that hereafter theories of politeness would focus both on the hearer and the speaker. Surprisingly, even in Lakoff’s consideration of ‘politeness’, we find greater treatment of the hearer’s part. Once she states her proposal about the Rules of Pragmatic Competence she puts together the claim that these rules have been highly affected by three areas of pragmatic behaviour which are ‘the speaker’s assumptions about his relations with his addressee, his real-world situation as he speaks and the extent to which he wishes to change either or both or to reinforce them.’ (1973:296). It seems, then, that the whole

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*industry* of politeness manners is substantiated by the concerns and needs of the addressee which are always taken into consideration by the speaker!

Moving to Brown & Levinson’s (B&L hereafter) theory of ‘politeness’, the whole scene has not changed dramatically. With a focus on ‘reconstructing speaker’s communicative intentions’ (B&L 1987:8), they have tried to account for ‘the nature of communication as a special kind of intention designed to be recognized by the recipient’ (1987:7). In that way, they have adopted the perspective of the other as crucial for their analysis. Even though, from the beginning of their analysis, they draw their attention to the ‘face’ of the interactants and its mutual vulnerability in the context of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs hereafter), they maintain that ‘any rational agent will seek to avoid these face threatening acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. In other words, he will take into consideration the relative weightings of at least three ‘wants’:

a) The want to communicate the content of the FTA x

b) The want to be efficient or urgent

c) The want to maintain H’s face to any degree.

Unless (b) is greater than (c), S will want to minimize the threat of his FTA (1987:68, my emphasis).

Judging from the above, we have no further reservation to assume that their focus is on the hearer, that is, on his needs as the prevalent constraint of the interaction. Yet, they include a brief outline of those FTAs that are directed and threaten not only the hearer’s face but also that of the speaker’s, without describing or providing further strategies in order to minimize the threat towards the speaker. Consequently, what we figure out is that the hearer has needs regarding the protection of his negative/positive face while the speaker is introduced with the intension of fulfilling ‘H’s face wants to some degree, as a rational means to secure H’s cooperation, either in respect of face maintenance or some joint activity or both [...] so we have then a derivative want of S’s to minimize the FTA’ (1987: 90).

Following the trend of ‘intentionality’ in interaction we come to Geoffrey Leech and his belief that ‘politeness does not serve here as a premise in making inferences about S’s communicative intention’. Thus, the Politeness Principle (PP) does not seem to help in understanding S’s intention although, obviously, it plays a role in S’s choosing the appropriate expression of his communicative intention [...]. Thus, the PP may help to understand reasons S had for choosing the particular content and form of what he said, but usually does not help to infer S’s intentions’ (Leech 1983:38-39). Leech is interested in the distinction between illocutionary goals and social goals (1983:17) and on that basis he formulates his theory based on an analysis that includes Maxims and Scales with one major concern: to define politeness as different types of behaviour which aim at realising the maximum benefit for the speaker/hearer and at the same time reserving the minimum cost for both of them (Leech 1983:104). Despite his insightful and promising intention, he is a researcher who also decided to ‘[...] concentrate more on the heuristic strategies of interpretation, looking at politeness from the addressee’s rather than from the speaker’s end’ (Leech 1983:104).

My review of the notion of ‘politeness’ will incorporate two more researchers, Eelen and Watts. Eelen argues for an alternative conceptualization of ‘politeness’ with the characteristics of variability, evaluativity, argumentativity and discursiveness. This view of politeness ‘takes full account of the hearer’s position and the evaluative moment; is able to capture both politeness and impoliteness; provides a more dynamic, bi-directional view of the social individual relationship; and thus acknowledges the individual (in terms of both variability and creativity) as well as evolution and change as intrinsic to the nature of politeness’ (Eelen 2001:240, 247). His long-term goal is to reveal the nature of politeness out of the stereotypical binary categories of speaker-hearer; however he still makes a critical comment on the absence of the appropriate acknowledgement of the hearer. He assumes that, even though the hearer is treated as an outstanding member of the interaction in the literature,
s/he is also a participant who is static and predictable in reaction in the interaction. Thus, not only does Eelen point out the obvious fact that previous theories focus on the hearer, but he also stresses that the notion of the ‘hearer’ needs different treatment. However there is still no reference to the concern of the speaker’s needs.

Last but not least, Watts identifies politeness as linguistic behavior which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable (Watts 1989:19). Politeness is viewed as ‘explicitly marked, conventionally interpretable subset of ‘politic behavior’ responsible for the smooth functioning of socio-communicative interaction and the consequent production of well-formed discourse within open social groups characterized by elaborated speech codes’ (1989:136). Watts, like Eelen, tries to offer “ways of recognizing when a linguistic utterance might be open to interpretation by interlocutors as “(im)polite”’ (Watts 2003:143). As we can see, this is another case of the other-oriented approaches in the literature. Watts himself confirms the above observation when he distinguishes two forms of marked behaviour ‘one leading to communicative breakdowns and the other to an enhancement of ego’s standing with respect to alter, […]’. The first type of behavior is “non-politic”, the second, I contend, “polite” (Watts 1992:51, my emphasis).

3 STUDIES ON SELF-POLITENESS

Walking away from the literature that, as we have already seen, is to a high degree other-oriented, we move on to theories of politeness that concern the speaker’s point of view. The speaker’s face is recognised by two researchers, who propose an explicit consideration and a different treatment of it. Both researchers acknowledge this deficiency in literature and propose a broader model, either extending B&L’s theory or using Relevance theory.

Rong Chen (2001) proposes a model of self-politeness within the framework of B&L’s theory. He believes that speakers of a language have face needs. However, they also need to perform various speech acts in social life, some of which, if done without redress, will threaten their own face, called S(elf)-F(ace) T(hrreatening) A(ct)'s. As a result, speakers adopt various strategies to mitigate the force of threat of these SFTA’s (Chen 2001:95). For this purpose, his model includes a set of superstrategies (four for the record) based on the categorization of B&L. All the strategies are directed both to the negative and positive face of the speaker. Apart from these strategies, he proposes two factors that influence strategy selection:

1. The degree to which self-face is threatened by other, which depends on
   A: The confrontationality of the communicative event
   B: The gravity of threat of the FTA by other, which is the sum of
      a: The severity of the FTA
      b: The directness of the FTA;

2. The degree to which self-face is threatened by the SFFA, which depends on
   A: The severity of the SFTA
   B: The consequence of the SFTA

(Chen 2001:98)

The purpose of Chen’s study is to bridge the gap of B&L’s theory of politeness so as to be considered more completed. This binary categorization proposed (politeness to others and politeness to self) is intended to be more of an instrument of analysis than a dogmatic image of reality. It is important to note, though, that even as an extension of B&L’s theory, a very effective step has been made for the outline of a theory of ‘politeness’ due to emphasis on the face of the speaker. On the other hand, there is always skepticism concerning the
bottom theory; namely that, even if the theory is extended with the perspective of the speaker, it is still characterized by a static view based on linguistic structures which have their own sources in social norms and social rules. The only flexible and dynamic part is that of the choice of the strategy and of the evaluation of the participants. However there is a very restricted and fixed set of strategies and evaluations.

Sukriye Ruhi also pays attention to the face of the speaker. She works within the framework of the Rapport Management model introduced by Spencer-Oatey (2000) and she conceives of ‘self-politeness’ as ‘the speaker’s concerns over his/her face values and social rights’. Ruhi maintains that ‘self-presentation is an important dimension of self-politeness in that it gives substance both to the notion of how face is managed in communication and to the eventual face value of the speaker through attributions or interpretations that addressees assign to the self-presentation and communicative intentions’ (Ruhi 2004:7). Within this framework of Rapport Management and the analysis of Goffman’s notion of demeanour, she claims that since the speaker may not only attend to the protection of face needs and social rights of others, maintenance of alter’s face and/or harmonious relations with alter may not be in the interest of the speaker. To this effect, she proposes ‘three super-strategies to supplement concern for other’s face and social rights: “display confidence,” “display individuality,” and “display (im)politeness”’ (2004:8). By doing that, according to her view, we can find a way to balance both the maxim and the face-management approaches. In order to explore this approach to self-politeness, she examines compliment responses2 because they are considered an act that displays genuine or routine concern of others.

4 Speaker’s face in compliments and compliment responses

On the basis of the above observations, I have chosen to examine compliments and more specifically compliment responses (CR hereafter). According to B&L, compliments have an ambiguous interpretation: they are considered a positive politeness strategy (1987:103) and at the same time a face threatening act against the hearer’s face (1987:66). Consequently, in B&L’s framework, a speech act (compliments) is used as a way to be polite (politeness strategy) and at the same time as an act which can reverse their hearer-based framework.

I will draw upon Sifianou’s (2001:410-412) categorization of routine and non-routine compliments based on the criteria of syntax and semantics in order to locate the adjacency pair of compliment and compliment response. On the one hand, we have routine compliments which follow the usual topics of compliments (appearance, ability, e.t.c.) and semantic and syntactic structure (adjectives, verbs with positive semantic value), while the non-routine compliments are more creative exchanges and perhaps covert expressions of admiration. Drawing on the above categorization, I focus on compliment responses but for different reasons than those of Ruhi & Chen. Firstly, CR exhibit variability as regards the speech act selected, therefore a response may be a positive or a negative politeness strategy depending on the speech act selected. Secondly, despite their variability they share a common feature: the need to balance two different and non-mutually satisfied constraints (Pomerantz 1978:8-12): 1. the agreement with the complimenter and 2. the avoidance of self-praise.

My hypothesis is that, despite the fact that both constraints are thought to protect the complimenter’s (hearer’s hereafter) face (Pomerantz 1978), they can threaten his/her face, and eventually enhance the complimenter’s face (speaker’s hereafter). This can be more easily understood if we look at the constraints more carefully. The agreement with the complimenter

2 Ruhi (2006:74), in reverse with Chen’s previous study (1993) about compliment responses, believes that Leech’s model ‘[…] is deficient in describing self-presentational concerns and that the face construct needs to be incorporated into the model’.
entails self-praise, since if you do not avoid self-praise you engage in an act of self-praise; moreover, when the speaker accepts the praise of himself s/he makes the P, R, D values explicit by displaying his/her higher position. Thus, s/he threatens the hearer’s face. The avoidance of self-praise, that is the 2nd constraint, results in compliment rejection, threatening the hearer’s face again. For the above reasons, CR seem to enhance the complimentee’s face as long as in the case of ‘self-praise’ (which is the consequence of the 1st constraint) the complimentee enhances his/her negative face by posing himself/herself in a higher position than the complimenter, while in the case of the rejection of a compliment (which is the consequence of the 2nd constraint) the complimentee acts freely (freedom of imposition).

5 DATA PROCESSING

My data consist of twenty-six natural informal conversations among friends and relatives. I have chosen natural occurring interaction in agreement with Golato (2002), who maintains that only the study of that kind of data actually reveals what is happening in interaction. In fact, the context of friendly conversations has been selected for three main reasons: a) it is an interaction in a non-institutional context, b) there are no hierarchical relationships between the participants and c) there is symmetry in roles and age among interactants.

I have isolated thirty cases of CR, twenty-seven of which involve agreement/acceptance with the compliment. Cases of this kind are exemplified below.

(1) Æ O: Και πολλή καλή ιδέα, (.) τη βρίσκω. =And very good idea, (.) the-FEM-ACCUS found ‘And I find it a very good idea.’
Æ T: Καλο[τάτη.] Πήγαμε στην Τομπουρλίκα λοιπόν, ήταν πολύ νωρίς Very [best.] (We) went to Tompourlika so was very early ‘The best. So we went to Tompourlika, it was very early.’
O: Ναι. [Yes.]
‘Yes’
T: ήταν εννιά η ώρα ακόμα/ ήταν εννιάμιση; Was nine the-FEM hour yet/ was nine thirty?
‘It was nine o’clock yet/ was it nine thirty?’
A: °Ναι. °Yes.
‘Yes.’

In general, the cases of agreement/acceptance follow the common types that have been described in the literature on compliment responses. What we can observe is that the dominant tendency in the particular Greek sample is to agree with the complimenter. However, the speaker makes no effort to avoid self-praise; on the contrary, there have been cases where the speaker not only accepts the compliment but also upgrades its positive semantic value (see example 1).

As far as the remaining 3 cases are concerned, they involve rejection/disagreement. An example of this kind is the following:

(2) Æ N: =Γιατί μου φαίνονται πολύ γερά τα μαλλιά σου
Æ O: =Ναι, μηδέν µηδέν
Æ T: Πιστεύετε για πολλά χρόνια ότι κάνει αυτή η πράξη; Believe for many years that you do this action?
Æ A: =Ναι, μηδέν µηδέν

The second constraint (avoidance of self-praise → rejection of the compliment) seems to be the dispreferred choice for the specific data. Bearing in mind that in B&L’s theory, the acceptance of a compliment should be accompanied with downgrading in order to protect the hearer’s face (which at the same time damages the speaker’s face) we would expect compliment responses to follow the above limitation. However, we find the acceptance of a compliment without downgrading or even worse, with upgrading, a case that explicitly enhances the speaker’s face and threatens the hearer’s. In other words, in my data the speaker seems to prefer to protect his/her face than that of the hearer’s (damaging at the same time the face of the hearer).

6 PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON GENDER

In the thirty cases of compliments and their responses, nineteen cases (66.6%) are addressed to and responded to by women and the remaining eleven cases (33.3%) by men. Sixteen out of the nineteen cases which involve women are cases of acceptance/agreement and the remaining three are cases of rejection (actually, these are the only cases of rejection in my data).

In general, female compliment responses follow the common types of responses in the case of acceptance: laughter, agreement markers, accept with downgrading, back channel response. A great number of cases consist of compliments that are addressed to men, even though my data do not include only non-mixed conversations. In fact, in their vast majority they are conversations exclusively among women.

The eleven cases which involve male responses are cases of acceptance. However, there is no effort to downgrade the praise. Besides the common types of acceptance/agreement, there is a tendency to further upgrade the self-praise. This can happen in two ways: i. either the male–complimentee elaborates on the praised feature or ii. he enhances the positive semantic value of the adjective by a. the use of the respective superlative b. the replacement of it with another adjective of equal or greater value.

Lack of homogeneity in my data does not allow further comparison between female and male responses. Therefore, we cannot make more general remarks. Qualitative analysis is needed in order to figure out how men and women actually behave in interaction, in what way they protect their face in different communicative situations and how they construct and co-construct their gendered selves.

7 CONCLUSIONS

The preference of acceptance/agreement with the compliment that has been noted in the case of my Greek data is certainly related to cultural differentiation. The notion of the agreement/acceptance or that of the rejection/disagreement, even if we accept that they have their cultural counterparts, still reveal, as we have already seen, the commitment of the speaker to an act of self-praise. Taking into consideration this tension in the speaker’s preferences, we
cannot overlook the speaker’s face and underestimate his/her needs in a theory of ‘politeness’, since s/he is one of the main protagonists in interaction. Perhaps we should reconsider the notion of FTAs, as threatening acts primarily against the speaker’s face and secondarily the hearer’s. In other words, the threat is directed firstly to the face of the speaker and damages his/her image, if s/he does not employ the appropriate strategy in order to protect others and ensure smooth interaction.

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