

**RAPPORT MANAGEMENT BY SPANISH LEARNERS OF  
ENGLISH AS AN L2 AT THE OPENING PHASE OF  
INTERACTION IN THE TOURIST INFORMATION OFFICE:  
A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS**

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RESUMEN

*Este trabajo analiza la gestión de las relaciones interpersonales por parte de estudiantes de inglés como L2 en Turismo en la fase inicial de la interacción en una oficina de turismo. Basado en los trabajos de Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008, 2009) y Brown y Levinson (1987), explora las estrategias de cortesía que estos estudiantes emplean en tres sistemas de cortesía (Scollon y Wong-Scollon 1995) para gestionar sus relaciones sociales con su L2. Con ello, examina si el comportamiento de estos estudiantes en dicha fase interactiva difiere significativamente del de los hablantes nativos.*

Palabras clave: gestión de las relaciones interpersonales, estrategias de cortesía, sistemas de cortesía, oficina de turismo, fase inicial.

ABSTRACT

*This paper analyses rapport management at the opening phase of interaction by Spanish students of English as an L2 in Tourism at the tourist information office. Based on Spencer-Oatey's (2000, 2008, 2009) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) works, it explores the politeness strategies these learners use in three politeness systems (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1995) to manage rapport through their L2. Thus, this work examines whether these learners' behaviour significantly differs from native speakers'.*

Keywords: rapport management, politeness strategies, politeness systems, tourist information office, opening phase.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Rapport management* (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2008, 2009) conceives of communication as aimed at transmitting information and establishing, maintaining or modifying social relationships. This paper applies its theoretical tenets to the analysis of interaction between L2 learners of English at a tourist information office. In this context, rapport management is essential, for one of the functions of such office is to dynamize tourism. Efficient rapport management may have positive outcomes and contribute to make tourism a thriving industry. Moreover, rapport management by the staff achieves a special relevance when it is not carried out in their native language, but in an L2, as there may arise pragmatic failures. Therefore, this work explores the linguistic means wherewith future professionals of the tourist industry manage rapport through their interlanguage in order to isolate possible problems. Due to space restrictions, the analysis will only focus on the opening phase of interaction.

This paper firstly summarises the main theoretical concepts of Spencer-Oatey's framework and relates them to the interactive context of this study. Secondly, it explains its methodology. Thirdly, it presents the analysis and a brief discussion of the data collected. Finally, it offers some conclusions.

## 2. RAPPORT MANAGEMENT AT THE TOURIST OFFICE

Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008, 2009) contends that interaction is governed by *sociopragmatic interactional principles* that social groups internalise and tacitly take for granted. She puts forward that, when defining, maintaining or modifying social relationships, interlocutors manage three contextual parameters: (i) *face sensitivities*, (ii) *sociality rights and obligations*, and (iii) *interactional goals*.

Face is "[...] the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 14). It is related to dignity, honour, status, reputation and competence and has two aspects: *quality face* and *identity face*. The former alludes to every person's desire to be positively evaluated by others on the basis of their personal features

and skills, while the latter refers to everyone's wish to be acknowledged within a group on the basis of more personal traits. At the tourist information office, the *tourist information agent* is expected to maintain or strengthen her quality face by providing the *user* –the tourist– with objective, true and complete information about tourist products. Thus, she presents herself as a skilful and qualified worker who tries to satisfy the user's needs. By being polite, giving options and advice, making suggestions and paying due attention to the user, the agent also intensifies her own and the user's quality and identity face.

Sociality rights are social or personal expectancies or entitlements that individuals claim for themselves (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 14). Some are constantly negotiated, while others are culturally or situationally determined beforehand. Since interlocutors expect these rights to be respected, they create expectations which, if unsatisfied, may affect rapport management. At the tourist information office, these rights and obligations are determined by the institutional nature of the context. They comprise the agent's obligation to give information about tourist products and the user's right to be adequately informed. Consequently, for instance, the user may expect the agent to treat him appropriately and to provide him with helpful information, whereas the agent may expect the user not to question her information.

Interactional goals may damage social interaction if they come into conflict. If they do not, their management may result in rapport-maintenance or rapport-enhancement. In the context of this study, the agent's goals include giving information that satisfies the user, while the user's goals involve getting true and complete information in a fast and concise way because of time availability. Agents' awareness and efficient management of users' interactional goals may be crucial in regions where tourism is an important source of income.

Apart from these factors, interlocutors must be aware of their power, social distance and their acts. Users normally have *legitimate power* over agents, as they have the right to ask for information and are a potential source of income for the city. On the contrary, agents have *expert power* because they are knowledgeable about tourist products (Spencer-Oatey 1992)<sup>1</sup>. Since users go to tourist information offices sporadically, their frequency of contact, familiarity and affect

would be non-existent, which renders their social distance high (Spencer-Oatey 1996; Lorés Sanz 1997-1998). However, their social distance may decrease if there arises *comradeship* between them, as a consequence of personal revelations and the user perceiving the agent as helpful (Hays 1984). Nevertheless, their social distance may be *hierarchically* determined owing to the interlocutors' social roles and/or age (Thomas 1995). The typical acts at the opening phase of interaction are *ritual* –greetings, welcomes– and precede other *substantive* acts at the transactional phase (Edmondson and House 1981)<sup>2</sup>. Although beginning interaction may involve some threat (Brown and Levinson 1987), it is rather unlikely that in this context it does, for information is expected to be a free good as well as part of the interlocutors' sociality rights and obligations. Rather, it would be a face-boosting act and contribute to rapport.

Rapport may be threatened by means of behaviours that challenge face, sociality rights and obligations and/or interactional goals. Although these last two behaviours may be problematic, they do not necessarily involve a face-loss. This originates when individuals are criticised or feel they have lost credibility. When interacting, interlocutors may adopt any of four possible orientations: rapport-enhancement, rapport-maintenance, rapport-neglect or rapport-challenge (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 29-31, 2008: 28-29). At the tourist information office it is expected that agents show a rapport-enhancement or maintenance orientation to promote tourism.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Twenty-four conversations in a fictitious tourist information office have been analysed in this study. These data were collected through role-plays performed by 40 informants. Of these, thirty-six were Spanish students doing their second year of Tourism at EUSA, Seville. On average, they have studied English for thirteen years, so their level is A2/B1, and some have already had some experience with the tourism industry. Twelve students role-played in Spanish to supply the Spanish data and the other twenty-four in English to supply the interlanguage data, on which this study is focused. The four remaining informants were American English speakers. Two of them came from

the University of North Carolina, but did not study Tourism, while the other two were studying Tourism at EUSA at the time of the study. They supplied the American English data used.

Informants were grouped in pairs and instructed to role-play in three situations that correspond to three politeness systems (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1995). The *deference* system [-P, +D] is reflected in a situation where the agent interacts with a 68 year-old tourist planning to spend some days in Seville. Their social distance is high because of lack of contact and the tourist's age. The *hierarchical* system [+P, +/-D] is represented in a situation in which the agent interacts with a Norwegian tour-operator who wishes to include Seville in a tourist package. His legitimate power overrides the agent's expert power because of his higher professional status and the possible economic consequences his decisions may have. The *solidarity* system [-P, -D] is displayed in a context where the agent interacts with a German backpacker. The power relationship would be balanced, but there would be little social distance because both interlocutors are young.

Role-plays were recorded in May and June of 2010 in a classroom by means of *Sound Recorder 6.1*. Most of the informants were acquainted with the room and its equipment and were used to being recorded. Conversations were transcribed following the notational system used by Spencer-Oatey (2000) and segmented into turns<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The opening sequences in the deference system show the occurrence of *business* greetings common in service encounters (Ebsworth et al. 1996). All of them are structured as full adjacency pairs, which suggests that greetings are well-learned structures. As opposed to the American English conversations, where interlocutors only used one greeting and in some cases did not respond to it, in the interlanguage data speakers produce the second pair-element and even follow the first greeting by another one in the same turn, a possible transfer from their native language:

- (1) A: [1] Good morning sir, how can I help you?  
U: [2] Hello; my name is:: señor Smith (.) I would: like to visit Seville and I have my first time in the city
- (2) U: [1] Good morning,  
A: [2] Good morning, madam, how can I help you?,  
U: [3] Yeah, I (.) will like to visit Seville eh (.) in the summer and I (.) want some information about the city.
- (3) A: [1] Good morning madam how may I help you,  
U: [2] eh Good morning eh I would like to visit Seville in spring eh (-) a weekend
- (4) U: [1] eh: hello; good morning?  
A: [2] ah good morning;  
U: [3] eh: I am I eh: I am a retired person and I would like to: visit Seville: <<but I have never been there>>eh: could you: help me please??  
A: [4] Oh great? eh: when would you like to come?

In the first three examples, agents use deferential forms to address users, a negative-politeness strategy that enables them to acknowledge the users' power and show social distance, as well as to attend to their quality and identity face. Agents also offer help in a ritualistic way and by means of negative politeness, perceptible in the modal verbs, show concern for users' sociality rights and interactional goals. Although this offer does not appear in the fourth example, by listening attentively the agent also shows deference to the user and concern for his quality and identity face.

In their turns, users identify themselves in (1) and (4) to make clear their social role and status and underline the social distance they perceive. They resort to what seems an off-record strategy in (1) and (3) to insinuate their interactional goals and compensate for the unlikely imposition of their subsequent requests for information. In contrast, this strategy is followed by a non-redressed explicit performative in (2) and an indirect question redressed with negative politeness in (4). These make manifest the users' intentions and turn the previous strategy into a positive-politeness strategy that consists of giving reasons. Also, in (4) the user avoids a possible threat to his quality face by speeding up his acknowledgement that he had never been to the city before.

In three of the conversations in the hierarchical system (5, 6, 7), users greet first and begin interaction, showing thus their legitimate power, while in (8) it is the agent that greets first. Conscious of users' power, agents respond to their greetings in the first three examples with two greetings and ritual offers of help, thus attending to both the users' and their own quality and identity faces. In (8) the user responds to the agent's greeting with two greetings too. It is noteworthy that only in (6) does the agent select the negative-politeness strategy consisting of being deferential to show her awareness of both the latter's power and their hierarchical distance. Besides, in (7) the user unexpectedly greets the agent in an informal way in his second turn, maybe to lessen distance:

(5) U: [1] Hello

A: [2] Hello good afternoon how can I help you??

U: [3] yes, eh: I am a very important Norwegian (.) tour operator and: I want to: include Seville? In a package tour; you are?

(6) U: [1] hello good morning (.) my name is: (.) John Carrey and (.) I come from eh (.) Norway Packaged Tours eh I (.) I would like to: to have eh some information about Se-Seville

A: [2] hello good morning sir; eh so you come you come from Norway Packaged Tours and you like information from Seville? That's right, eh <<first of all I would like to tell you [...]>>

(7) U: [1] Hello

A: [2] Hello, good morning How Could I help you?

U: [3] Hi, I work for a Norwegian packaged tour and I would like to visit Seville and what can I do in Seville.

(8) A: [1] Good morning?

U: [2] Hello good morning?

A: [3] How can I help you?

U: [4] I'm I work for a tour operator eh in: Nor Norway and I need some information for eh: my agency to know what opportunities we have eh if we come to Spain to Seville and I would eh like to know all the opportunities please;

Users identify themselves after the offer of help in (5), (7) and (8), while in (6) the user does so in the same turn as the greeting. These identifications make explicit their social role and status and

emphasise social distance. While in (5), (7) and (8) identifications are rather succinct and only contain basic information, in (6) the identification is longer and includes personal information, maybe to compensate for an excessive hierarchical distance and to create a relatively friendlier atmosphere.

When introducing his request for information, in (5) the user chooses a bald on-record strategy, an unmitigated imperative, because of his power. In contrast, in (6) and (7) users redress their requests by means of negative-politeness strategies, namely conditionals. Finally, in (8) the user formulates his request as a need-statement, although he also resorts to conditionals. These enable users to show concern for their interlocutors and avoid challenging rapport through bald on-record strategies, which could have been interpreted as unduly rude and over-impositive. The desire to maintain rapport may underlie the use of the first person plural pronoun in (8), which enables the user to dilute his agency.

The only example that includes the response to the request is (6), where it appears in the agent's first turn. Although the agent in this example resorts to negative politeness –the deferential form of address– she combines it with a positive-politeness strategy, repeating what the user has just said. Thus, she shows awareness of the user's desires, seeks agreement with him and perhaps some proximity, as he implicitly suggests that they share a common interactional goal. When giving information, the agent takes a long turn to show her expert power and to attend to her own quality face.

Finally, in two of the conversations in the solidarity system, users begin interaction. While in (9) the user produces two greetings, in (10) the user simply produces one before continuing with an identification that conveys personal information. Responding to the first turn, in (9) the agent greets deferentially, which could seem inappropriate to this system, as both interlocutors are young. However, by doing so the agent seems to protect his own quality face as informer by implying that he is a serious professional. In contrast, in (10) the agent does not produce a second greeting, probably because of the low distance. In the other two conversations, agents begin with a business greeting (11) and another double greeting (12). As in (10), in (11) the agent



follows his greeting by an identification, while in (12) the user does not respond with a second greeting:

- (9) U: [1] Hello good morning,  
A: [2] Hello good morning sir, can I help you?  
U: [3] I would like to go to Seville eh can you recommend: anything please?  
A: [4] Sure do you li do you want eh to go to museum or centre histo historic?? of Seville? What type of tourism do you want (.) to do it?
- (10) U: [1] Hello? I'm an Erasmus student and: and I'm studying in Madrid and I would like to:: some information about eh (.) what (.) eh can (.) what can I do in: Seville, eh can you help me please?  
A: [2] eh: ok well, let me see, (.) eh:: first of all eh:: you can [...]
- (11) A: [1] eh (.) Good morning, <<how can I help you>>?,  
U: [2] hello, mm I'm 27 years old and I want to go to Seville can you tell me something???  
A: [3] Ok eh is your first time in Seville?,  
U: [4] Yes  
A: [5] Ok are you going with your friends?,  
U: [6] Yes  
A: [7] How many people?  
U: [8] eh: twenty: twenty friends and me.
- (12) A: [1] Hello, good morning,  
U: [2] eh... I would like to know... eh... what places are interesting in the city  
A: [3] of course... eh... I would eh... give you... a little explanation ok? Eh: what are you seeking for? [To]  
U: [4] [monuments, museums] ?

In (9), the request for information is made in a conventionally indirect way with an *illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID). It is prefaced by a want-statement redressed by negative politeness, which acts as a whole as a positive-politeness strategy amounting to the reasons for the request. In (10) and (11), the requests appear in both users' first turns after identifications, introduced by want-statements. While in (10) this statement is mitigated with negative politeness, in (11) it goes bald-on-the-record. As for the requests, they are made in a conventionally indirect way and in (10) with an IFID, too. This indicates users' perception of the system where interaction takes place

and suggests no rapport-challenge. However, (12) contrasts with these examples because the user resorts to an off-record strategy to imply his interactional goal.

Before giving information, in (9) the agent attends to her own quality face by indicating compliance with the request and checks the user's interests through a non-redressed direct want-question, which shows awareness of the low distance. Then, she gives options, a positive-politeness strategy to imply concern for the user's quality face. Similarly, in (11) the agent makes a series of direct questions to show interest in the user, attend her own quality face and reveal her own perception of the low distance. Finally, in (12) the agent also addresses her own quality face by presenting herself as a qualified professional. She also implies scarce social distance through a direct question that suggests concern for the user's interests. The non-redressed direct questions in these three examples evidence the nature of a politeness system where formality is almost unnecessary. In the case of (11), for instance, this can also be observed in the brief answers the user responds with. The data in these examples contrast with (10), where the agent directly proceeds to comply with the user's request.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Despite the limited amount of data used for this analysis and its focus on the opening phase, it can be observed that, all in all, learners of English studying Tourism do not seem to have serious problems when managing rapport in their interlanguage. In the three politeness systems examined, informants acting as agents resort to business greetings to address both their identity and quality face, present themselves as competent professionals, show awareness of sociality rights and obligations, and conveniently manage interactional goals. However, the informants' behaviour in the interlanguage differs from the native speakers' behaviours in some respects.

In the deference system agents adequately choose deferential forms to address users, thus showing awareness of distance, while users select off-record, negative-politeness and bald-on-record strategies to introduce their requests. This contrasts with the native

preference for negative politeness. In the hierarchical system agents and users combine both negative politeness and bald-on-record strategies, which also contrasts with the native tendency to use negative politeness. Finally, in the solidarity system informants also select business greetings, bald-on-record strategies, negative politeness and conventional indirectness during their interactions. These findings contrast with the long greetings and the tendency to include more positive-politeness strategies, such as giving personal information or using colloquial greetings, observable in the native data. Furthermore, in all three systems informants tend to use double greetings, which only occurred in the solidarity system in the native data. In this system, one of the informants employs a deferential form, while in the native data no such form was found.

Although the differences in the use of politeness strategies found may be attributed to personal choices and considering them pragmatic failures would depend on natives' benevolence, students of English in Tourism should be made aware of the natives' tendencies when selecting linguistic strategies to manage rapport in a specific context like the tourist information office. They should also be alerted to the potential consequences their own linguistic choices might have. If rapport-management in this context is considered fundamental to promote tourism, by raising future professionals' awareness and alerting them of the possible results their linguistic behaviour may have, teachers will certainly contribute to enhance their pragmatic competence and endow them with the knowledge that will enable them to manage rapport efficiently in their future working world through their L2 and avoid possible pragmatic failures.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Spencer-Oatey (1992), legitimate power is an individual's right to prescribe or ask for certain things on the grounds of his social role, status or age, while expert power arises as a consequence of an individual's knowledge or expertise another may need or be interested in.

<sup>2</sup> According to Edmondson and House (1981: 48), substantive acts are those that reflect the interlocutors' goals and may have some interactive outcomes.

<sup>3</sup> In the examples, 'A' refers to 'agent' and 'U' to 'user'.

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