

Three Different Pragmatic Approaches to the Teaching of the (Im)politeness of Phatic Utterances in English

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper, I suggested some guidelines for teaching different aspects of phatic utterances in the ESL class, such as their various types, the selection of their topic, the reasons why each of their types are used, or how and why they can generate ties of union between interlocutors (Padilla Cruz 2005a). The reason why I did so was the fact that teachers normally focus on the formulaic nature of such utterances, the cross-cultural differences between their usage in the L1 and L2 or their structural properties when they constitute phatic sequences, but they neglect other aspects of phatic utterances because of a widely extended opinion that their propositional content is irrelevant. However, in that paper I did not address another aspect of crucial importance for the ESL class: why, when and how evaluations about the (im)politeness of phatic utterances arise and how teachers can teach about their (im)politeness in particular circumstances in the target culture. And this is precisely the aim of this paper.

Politeness has been one of the major concerns in pragmatics over almost thirty years, as is proved by the different existing approaches and the vast literature on the topic. As opposed to a common conception of politeness as a *social norm* (Fraser 1990)¹, associated with the use of certain linguistic registers or styles, in pragmatics the concept of politeness is not at all restricted to the way in which some social classes or individuals use language in very specific contexts, but includes the linguistic behaviour of any individual (Kasper 1998: 677). Since the publication of Searle's (1969) and Grice's (1975) works, there has been a plethora of studies which see in politeness the underlying motivation why individuals use language in a particular manner, analyse the origins of that

¹ Eelen (2001: 30) calls this conception *politeness 1* because it is not scientifically-based.

motivation and offer a scientific view of language use, in which its interactive and social nature occupy a first place². Unfortunately, there is little agreement as to what politeness really is. Some authors have related it to the concept of *deference* (e.g. Ide 1982, 1989; Matsumoto 1989); other authors have associated it with the use of specific registers (e.g. Smith 1992); others have considered it to be an inherent property of specific utterances or speech acts (e.g. Ogino 1986), and, finally, others have regarded it as a purely pragmatic phenomenon because it is a *strategic* behaviour with which individuals try to avoid interpersonal conflict or achieve a wide array of interactive goals, such as the establishment, maintenance, improvement, change or destruction of their social relationships (e.g. Kasper 1990; Thomas 1995).

In his complete review of politeness models, Eelen (2001: 23) classifies the models developed by Lakoff (1973, 1977), Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Fraser and Nolen (1981), Ide (1982, 1989), Leech (1983), Arndt and Janney (1985, 1991), Watts (1989), Gu (1990) and Blum-Kulka (1992) as *core* models because they have inspired much of the subsequent research on the issue. In addition to them, there are other models – which I call *peripheral* because they have had less influence (Padilla Cruz 2004: 135, 2006: 702) – such as those developed by Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995), Kasher (1986), Ehlich (1992), Werkhofer (1992) or Meier (1995)³.

Since the aim of this paper is to offer some guidelines for teaching why, when and how phatic utterances can be evaluated as (im)polite, I will subscribe the pragmatic view of politeness as a strategic behaviour, and follow Brown (2000: 83) in that I also understand politeness as “[...] a special way of treating people, saying and doing things in such a way as to take into account the other person’s feelings”. Within the pragmatic view of politeness, there are three main approaches (Fraser 1990):

- a) The *conversational-maxim* approach, represented by Lakoff’s (1973, 1977) *Rules of Politeness* and Leech’s (1983) *Politeness Principle*. Both of them are based on Grice’s (1975) *Cooperative Principle*, and consist of additional interactive principles that complement the Cooperative Principle in order to account for the cases in which interlocutors appear not to abide by it. While Lakoff (1973: 297) understands politeness as a way to avoid offence, Leech (1983: 104) thinks that it “[...] is an important missing link between the CP [Cooperative Principle] and the problem of how to relate sense to force”.

² Such scientific studies are referred to by Eelen (2001: 30) as *politeness 2*.

³ See Eelen (2001) for an explanation and discussion of these models.

- b) The *face-saving* approach of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), according to whom politeness presupposes a potential of aggressiveness towards the *face*⁴ of one or more interlocutors. Hence, being polite consists in minimising or diminishing that aggressiveness so as to enable communication between potentially aggressive individuals.
- c) The *appropriateness* approach, represented by the works by Fraser and Nolen (1981), Zimmin (1981), Meier (1995), Escandell Vidal (1996, 1998) or Jary (1998a, 1998b), in which politeness is equated to the adequacy of verbal behaviour to a specific social context.

The suggestions for the teaching of the (im)politeness of phatic utterances that I will offer in this paper are based on these three approaches. Therefore, in the second section I will present two proposals that account for the (im)politeness of such utterances by postulating the existence of specific conversational maxims governing their usage and discuss their implications for the ESL class. Then, in the third section I will briefly summarise the main theoretical postulates of the face-saving approach to politeness. Since it assumes that some linguistic acts may imply a certain risk for or favour social interaction, some of its consequences for ESL class refer to the convenience of using or avoiding phatic utterances in particular cases where they may affect a social relationship. Finally, although the appropriateness approach to politeness has been proposed by several authors, in the fourth section I will only present Fraser and Nolen's (1981) work, which suggests that (im)politeness depends on a sort of relational contract that individuals establish. However, since these authors elaborated a very general framework for understanding politeness, I will also discuss the work by Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995), whose ideas can complement Fraser and Nolen's (1981) work, because they make it explicit how that relational contract can be determined. Then, I will review Laver's (1974, 1975, 1981) work on phatic communion, as this author was probably the first one who showed that certain types of phatic tokens are adequate when individuals have a specific social relationship and, as in the two previous sections, conclude with some implications for the ESL class.

2. THE CONVERSATIONAL-MAXIM APPROACH

Teachers normally present phatic utterances to students as utterances whose propositional content is trivial or very obvious, so that it does not transmit enough information. These ideas stem from the works of some linguists who have stressed the unimportance of such utterances as regards their informative content (e.g. Malinowski 1923; Abercrombie 1956, 1998; Turner 1973; Leech

⁴ See below for a definition of this concept.

1974; Hudson 1980; Edmondson and House 1981). As a consequence, phatic utterances are treated as deviations from a supposedly accepted way of speaking that meets the standards of 'authentic' and 'efficient' communication (Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992: 211; Coupland 2000: 7-8; Coupland and Ylännä-McEwen 2000: 179; Holmes 2000: 39; McCarthy 2000: 84; Tracy and Naughton 2000: 64). Such standards are those reflected in Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and its four maxims of *quantity*, *quality*, *relation* and *manner*.

More specifically, since the informative load of phatic utterances is insufficient, they violate the quantity maxim of the Cooperative Principle, which entitles speakers to provide hearers with the expected amount of information. For this reason, they are defective utterances. Hearers may interpret such defectiveness in some cases as an unwillingness to cooperate on the part of speakers and, consequently, evaluate their behaviour as impolite or rude. However, the usage of phatic utterances may be due to the existence of other interactive principles that influence the interlocutors' linguistic behaviour. Accordingly, Leech (1983) and Schneider (1988) have suggested a series of additional conversational maxims that complement the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and justify why individuals resort to such utterances in specific circumstances and, hence, why their usage is adequate and can receive a polite evaluation.

2.1. THE PHATIC MAXIM

Leech (1983) believes that phatic utterances violate the quantity maxim of the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975), but attributes that violation to the operation of additional conversational principles. On the one hand, he thinks that his *Politeness Principle* and its six maxims of *tact*, *generosity*, *approbation*, *modesty*, *agreement* and *sympathy* determine the usage of such utterances⁵. Accordingly, the usage of phatic utterances can be justified as attempts by the speaker to show agreement with the hearer or to indicate approbation of the hearer's point of view or ideas.

On the other hand, Leech (1983: 141) also thinks that the usage of phatic utterances is due to the effects of a new conversational maxim that explains why individuals do not always offer the expected amount of information: the *Phatic Maxim*. He formulates it both in a negative way, "Avoid silence", and in a positive way, "Keep talking". Therefore, the occurrence of phatic utterances in conversations may be explained as a consequence of the necessity that interlocutors feel to avoid silence or taciturnity, which could be interpreted as a sign of bad mood.

⁵ See Leech (1983: 132) for a more detailed discussion of these maxims.

Nonetheless, Leech (1983: 142) is perfectly aware that this new maxim that he proposes can turn out to be redundant, since its effects may be due to the operation of the maxims of sympathy and agreement. Furthermore, he admits that the existence of the Phatic Maxim would imply considering phatic communion as a linguistic behaviour whose purpose is the avoidance of silence, when phatic utterances also fulfil other interactive functions, such as the creation of solidarity and agreement between interlocutors.

2.2. THE SUPERMAXIMS OF POLITESSE AND FRIENDLINESS

Schneider (1988) also believes that the aim of phatic utterances is not the transmission of information that can improve and enrich the hearer's knowledge of reality, but the accomplishment of a very important social function. For this reason, their usage and occurrence must be accounted for by maxims of a social nature, the most important of which is "Be polite". Based on Lakoff's (1973, 1977) Rules of Politeness⁶ and Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle, he also proposed a series of more specific conversational maxims that complement the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and regulate the usage of such utterances.

According to Schneider (1988), the occurrence of phatic utterances depends on two aspects of interaction, which coincide with Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) concepts of *negative face* and *positive face*, respectively⁷. The first one is *politesse* or formality, which he takes it to be "[...] a reaction to the psychological pressure exerted by social norms" (Schneider 1988: 158). It is associated with the distant style emanating from Lakoff's (1973, 1977) first rule of politeness – "Do not impose, keep the social distance" – and its effect is the usage of phatic utterances referring to aspects of the communicative situation in which interlocutors are immersed. The second interactive aspect is *friendliness*, which is related to the deferent style deriving from Lakoff's (1973, 1977) second rule of politeness – "Offer options to the hearer" – instead of the style of comradeship emanating from her third rule – "Make the hearer feel good, be friendly". Friendliness is manifested by means of the usage of phatic utterances alluding to the interlocutors.

On the basis of these two interactive aspects, Schneider (1988: 158) suggests two supermaxims that would justify the usage of phatic utterances:

- a) "Avoid offence", which regulates polite or formal behaviour.
- b) "Be friendly", which regulates friendly behaviour.

⁶ See Lakoff (1973: 298) for the initial version, and Lakoff (1977: 88) for the final version of the rules of *formality*, *hesitancy* and *equality/camaraderie*.

⁷ See below for a definition of these two concepts.

These two supermaxims can be paraphrased as “Avoid everything negative” and “Make your interlocutor feel good”, respectively. Furthermore, each of these supermaxims is articulated in a series of four more specific maxims referring to different dimensions of interaction – *discourse*, *person*, *union* and *emotion* – as shown in the following table:

	<i>Politesse</i>	<i>Friendliness</i>
<i>Discourse</i>	Avoid silence	Say something nice
<i>Person</i>	Avoid curiosity	Show interest in the hearer
<i>Union</i>	Avoid conflict	Create ties of union
<i>Emotion</i>	Avoid pessimism	Be optimistic

The maxims of friendliness complement those of politesse (Schneider 1988: 159). Thus, “Avoid silence” prompts an individual to say something, but not necessarily something nice or inoffensive, so this maxim does not oblige an individual to make another feel good. Similarly, “Avoid curiosity” prevents the speaker from dealing with personal topics, whereas “Show interest” makes her resort to them, but without touching very intimate or taboo ones. Finally, “Avoid conflict” leads interlocutors to avoid disagreement, while “Create ties of union” prompts them to seek agreement and a positive evaluation from the other interlocutor.

Even if the supermaxims of politesse and friendliness and their respective maxims justify the more offensive or defensive usage of phatic utterances, the application of each of these supermaxims depends on contextual factors (Schneider 1988: 285). Thus, the supermaxim of politesse is normally associated with those situations in which two strangers or distant individuals interact, while the supermaxim of friendliness is related to ‘social events’ – e.g. gatherings, meetings, dinners, etc. For this reason, Schneider (1988: 285) concludes that politesse leads interlocutors to avoid silence, whereas friendliness favours social contact.

2.3.SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ESL CLASS

As has been seen, Leech (1983) and Schneider (1988) have proposed the existence of additional interactive principles that complement the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and explain why individuals use phatic utterances and the topics they can deal with. Even if these authors do not mention where their respective maxims come from, if they are universal or belong to the English culture, how interlocutors internalise them or if they are aware of their existence, their proposals imply the existence of a sort of cultural knowledge that conditions linguistic behaviour. In other words, what Leech (1983) and

Schneider (1988) have done is to capture some sociocultural motivations underlying linguistic behaviour.

Consequently, although phatic utterances could be considered at first sight as a deviation from certain standards of communication, and that deviation be interpreted as impoliteness or rudeness by a hearer who might expect more information, teachers could comment on the existence of those additional principles governing their usage. By doing so, they would make students aware of the fact that, if their linguistic behaviour follows the guidelines emanating from them, they should not be afraid that it is evaluated negatively. Thus, they could tell students that the usage of phatic utterances in some circumstances is perfectly acceptable if they are intended to avoid the negativity associated with taciturnity. Likewise, teachers can also show that the usage of phatic utterances about the communicative setting can be a way to avoid interpersonal conflict with the hearer by not dealing with personal topics, whereas the usage of utterances referring to the interlocutors can be a way to show interest in the other person or an attempt to establish ties of union by dealing with uncontroversial topics⁸.

3. THE FACE-SAVING APPROACH

The face-saving approach to politeness developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) rests on two assumptions. Firstly, the assumption that individuals follow the Cooperative Principle (Grice 1975) and that in those cases when they seem not to cooperate the reason that explains their behaviour is their intention to be polite. Secondly, that individuals are characterised by two features: rationality and *face*, which is “[...] the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61)⁹. It is this last concept that articulates the model of Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987).

3.1. BASIC THEORETICAL POSTULATES

Face has two opposed but complementary components:

- (i) *Negative face*, which the authors define as “[...] the want of every ‘competent member’ [of a society] that his actions be unimpeded by other” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62), and the “[...] want to have his

⁸ For a more detailed pragmatic explanation about the generation of ties of union, see Padilla Cruz (2005b).

⁹ This concept was directly taken from Goffman, who defined it as “[...] the positive social value a person claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attitudes” (1955: 319).

freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 129).

- (ii) *Positive face*, which they characterise as “[...] the want of every member [of a society] that his wants be desirable to at least some others” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62), and the “[...] perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 101).

Face is a vulnerable personal attribute that can be maintained, altered or lost during social interaction, so interlocutors must be interested in protecting their own face and the face of others from the aggressions or threats deriving from social interaction. Those aggressions or threats come from what Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) term *face-threatening acts (FTAs)*, which can affect the speaker’s or the hearer’s positive or negative face. Nonetheless, protecting one’s own face and the face of others may be a quite hard task, as the speaker must simultaneously communicate the propositional content that she wishes to transmit, communicate it in the most efficient and fastest way, and maintain her own face and that of the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987: 68). Therefore, in order to satisfy these three needs, interlocutors establish a series of linguistic strategies that allow them to express propositional contents in different manners.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 69), there are five main strategies that the speaker can use depending on the potential of risk that a certain verbal act has for her own face or the hearer’s face¹⁰:

1. Performing the FTA *boldly on-record*, without *redressive* action.
2. Performing the FTA on-record, with redressive action by means of *positive-politeness* strategies. Positive politeness is aimed at maintaining the interlocutors’ positive face, so it relies on the expression of solidarity, reciprocity, in-group membership, the sharing of feelings, emotions, intentions, attitudes or points of view.
3. Performing the FTA on-record, with redressive action by means of *negative-politeness* strategies. Negative politeness is aimed at maintaining the individuals’ negative face, so it is based on the expression of the unwillingness to impede their freedom of action and minimising the imposition of some acts.
4. Performing the FTA *off-record*.

¹⁰ See Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) for a more detailed explanation and discussion of the different politeness strategies and substrategies.

5. Avoid the FTA.

Finally, the decision about whether or not to perform an FTA and which politeness strategy to use is made by the speaker on the basis of the *weightiness* that she perceives that the FTA she wants to perform has. This is determined by the values of three sociological variables: the *social distance* (**D**) between the hearer and the speaker, the *relative power* (**P**) of one interlocutor over the other and the *rank of imposition* (**I**) of the act in a given culture or sociocultural group.

3.2. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ESL CLASS

Starting a conversation, addressing or keeping a conversation with someone using phatic utterances may entail some risk for social interaction. On the one hand, it may involve a potential of threat to the hearer's negative face, as it could probably bother him, above all if the speaker and hearer do not know each other, or if their status or age are different. Therefore, teachers may tell students to avoid phatic utterances and remain silent.

However, they should also know that silence is ambiguous and can be interpreted, for example, as a sign of a bad mood or shyness (Sifianou 1995: 100-101, 1997: 71). Silence would certainly be the safest option if the other individual does not speak, as it could avoid a possible interpersonal conflict (e.g. Tannen 1990: 260; Jaworski 1993: 25). By means of silence the speaker could show her consideration for or deference towards the hearer, above all if he is older or more powerful than her (e.g. Tannen 1985: 98; Kurzon 1992). Likewise, silence would be polite in those cases when the speaker feels that what she wants or intends to say could generate disagreement or be understood as a sign of disapproval (Sifianou 1995: 102).

On the other hand, the lack of a comment, greeting, remark or an exchange of phatic tokens when two individuals meet may also involve a threat to the hearer's positive face. According to many pragmaticians (e.g. Lyons 1968; Silva 1980; Leech 1983; Schneider 1988; Coupland, Coupland and Robinson, 1992; Coupland, Robinson and Coupland 1994), phatic utterances create solidarity, agreement and ties of union between interlocutors. Holmes (1988), Schneider (1988), Herbert (1990) and Chen (1993), for instance, argue that they achieve these effects because they are *face-enhancing* acts and are manifestations of the first eight positive-politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) in their model.

More exactly, in some circumstances phatic utterances may be regarded as instantiations of the seventh of such strategies, which leads interlocutors to presuppose common ground and to take for granted or state the existence of

affinity with hearers. With positive politeness an individual treats another as a person whose wishes and personal features she knows and admires. This is so because positive-politeness strategies rely on the expression of approval and interest in the hearer, the usage of markers of in-group membership, the search for agreement, or the establishment of reciprocity as regards the interlocutors' desires, intentions, features or preferences (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Brown 2000).

However, this perspective may also have some problems for teachers and students. Firstly, a particular verbal action cannot be considered a face-enhancing act in a decontextualised manner. In fact, acts such as compliments, which receive in many cases a phatic interpretation (e.g. Wolfson and Manes 1980; Manes and Wolfson 1981; Boyle 2000), may threaten the hearer's negative face if, for instance, there is not much intimacy between the interlocutors (Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk 1989: 75; Sifianou 1997: 70). Similarly, some compliments may condition the hearer's subsequent behaviour, as they can be understood as expressions of desire (Herbert 1989; Chen 1993; Jaworski 1995), and, according to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), that may be a face-threatening act.

Secondly, the fact that interlocutors use phatic utterances to establish ties of union or solidarity depends on the interactive maxims that they obey. Thus, if a cultural group favours the maxims of approbation or interest (Leech 1983), it will be very likely that its members use such utterances for that purpose. On the contrary, if its members follow the maxim of modesty (Leech 1983), its members will tend to avoid them.

Finally, teachers should not always present phatic utterances as positive-politeness strategies. In his work on phatic communion, Laver (1974, 1975, 1981) differentiated between *neutral* phatic utterances, which refer to the setting of the conversation, and *personal* phatic utterances, which allude to the participants. He also observed that the former type of phatic utterances tends to be used, for instance, when interlocutors are socially distant, while the latter is used when their social distance is low and they have a solidarity relationship. Even if personal phatic utterances can be identified with positive politeness because they contribute to intimacy, proximity, affinity or compromise between the interlocutors, neutral ones can be identified with negative politeness, as they result in social distancing, independence, freedom of action or imposition in certain contexts¹¹.

¹¹ But see below.

4. THE APPROPRIATENESS APPROACH

4.1. THE CONVERSATIONAL CONTRACT

Fraser and Nolen's (1981) starting point is the assumption that each interlocutor perceives and accepts an initial set of rights and obligations that determine what can be expected from himself and others in interaction. They call that set of rights and obligations *Conversational Contract*, and state that it is formed by beliefs of different nature. Some of those beliefs can be readjusted through interaction as a result of negotiation or changes in the social context where individuals interact, while others cannot. Among those that are hardly negotiable are conversational principles or maxims, such as the Cooperative Principle (1975), which have been imposed by social or cultural conventions. Among those that are negotiable are beliefs originated by previous exchanges or specific situations, depending on the interlocutors' perception of parameters such as power, distance or the social context itself (Fraser 1990: 232).

From this point of view, politeness must be understood as a temporary behaviour. Since interlocutors know the terms of their Conversational Contract, to be polite means to behave in accordance with the Conversational Contract that they have established: "To be polite is to abide by the rules of the conversational relationship. A speaker becomes impolite just in cases where he violates one or more of the contractual terms" (Fraser and Nolen 1981: 96). Interlocutors are rational beings aware of the fact that they must follow some norms or patterns regulating social interaction. Consequently, when they do not do so, there arises a negative evaluation of their behaviour and are considered as impolite, or even rude. Then, politeness in this framework is supposed to be a state of affairs existing in all communicative exchanges, so that individuals do not notice that they are being polite, but that they are being impolite.

However, Fraser and Nolen (1981) do not make it clear how interlocutors establish their different Conversational Contracts, which factors they take into account in order to do so or if there are different types of Conversational Contracts. In my opinion, the sociological variables power and social distance proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) must play a crucial role in this. For that reason, Fraser and Nolen's (1981) ideas can be implemented with those of Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995), who developed a quite interesting model that can be applied to the teaching of the (im)politeness of phatic utterances in the ESL class.

4.2.POLITENESS SYSTEMS

Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) also think that interlocutors possess a series of beliefs about social relationships, which they call *politeness systems*. During social interaction, they can verify or modify those beliefs. Their influence is such that they condition the type of linguistic strategy that interlocutors will select in order to encode their messages. Therefore, the concept of politeness system can be identified with that of Conversational Contract (Fraser and Nolen 1981).

Nevertheless, as opposed to Fraser and Nolen (1981), who do not explain how interlocutors define their Conversational Contract and if there are different types of it, Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) explicitly state that there are three politeness systems depending on the values assigned to the sociological variables power (P) and social distance (D)¹². The first two of such systems are symmetric, while the third one is asymmetric.

Firstly, the two symmetric politeness systems are determined by no power difference between interlocutors. On the one hand, there is a *deference* politeness system, in which interlocutors perceive that they are socially distant: “[...] participants are considered to be equals or near equals but treat each other at a distance” (Scollon and Scollon 1995: 44). This system is reflected in the formula [-P, +D], and exemplified by the relation between two colleagues at work with the same professional status who do not know each other well. The perception of this system leads interlocutors to resort to negative-politeness or off-record strategies or to avoid the performance of FTAs. On the other hand, there is a *solidarity* politeness system, where interlocutors sense that they are socially close. It is reflected in the formula [-P, -D], and exemplified by the relationship between two close friends. Its consequence is the performance of FTAs on-record or by means of positive-politeness strategies.

Secondly, the asymmetric politeness system is determined by a power difference between interlocutors, so they see themselves as occupying a different social position. Scollon and Scollon (1983, 1995) call it *hierarchical* and represent it with the formula [+P, +/-D], as the interlocutors’ social distance can be high or low. Their perception of this system makes the individual of higher status select positive-politeness strategies to perform FTAs or perform them on record without redressive action and the individual of lower status select negative-politeness or off-record strategies to perform FTAs or directly avoid their performance.

¹² See Padilla Cruz (2005c) for a revision of Scollon and Scollon’s (1983, 1995) initial politeness systems.

4.3.POLITENESS SYSTEMS AND THE USAGE OF PHATIC UTTERANCES

As aforementioned, in his work on phatic communion Laver (1974, 1975, 1981) differentiated between phatic utterances with *neutral* reference, alluding to features of the conversational setting (1, 2) – and another with *personal* reference about the speaker (*self-oriented*) (3, 4) or the hearer (*other-oriented*) (5, 6):

- (1) The bus seems to be delayed.
- (2) Nice day.
- (3) I like a cup of tea before going to work.
- (4) Hot work this.
- (5) That looks like hard work.
- (6) Smart coat!

He also related the usage of each type of phatic utterance in the United Kingdom and in the United States to the participants' social relationships, which are defined by their social status and distance or, what is the same, their power and social distance.

According to Laver (1974, 1975, 1981), when interlocutors have a solidarity relationship, i.e. a solidarity politeness system (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995), they normally select both neutral and personal phatic tokens. Secondly, when interlocutors are socially distant and there is no power difference between them, i.e. they interact in a deference politeness system (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995), they will avoid personal utterances and choose neutral ones. Finally, when interlocutors have a non-solidarity relationship with a power difference, i.e. they have established a hierarchical politeness system, the inferior will select self-oriented phatic utterances to address the superior, while the superior will choose other-oriented phatic utterances.

When individuals follow these patterns, their behaviour may be evaluated as polite. However, if they do not do so, the effects that they can achieve may be more complex (Laver 1975: 224). Hence, if in a hierarchical politeness system the superior addresses the inferior with a self-oriented phatic token, she may be understood as offering the other a temporal relationship of solidarity in which the power difference is cancelled. However, if the inferior addresses the superior with an other-oriented phatic token, the hearer may think that she is invading his psychological space. Similarly, in a deference politeness system, the selection of a self-oriented phatic utterance may be perceived as a momentary invitation to establish solidarity, whereas the selection of an other-oriented utterance may be felt as a brusque attempt to establish solidarity.

Consequently, when the linguistic behaviour of the speaker is perceived as an invasion of the hearer's psychological space or as if forcing the establishment of a solidarity relationship, her behaviour may be interpreted as impolite.

4.4.SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ESL CLASS

As has been seen, the (im)politeness of linguistic behaviour depends partially on its (in)adequacy to a perceived social context. Therefore, teachers should stress that evaluations about the (im)politeness of particular linguistic expressions, such as phatic utterances, may arise as a consequence of their (in)adequacy to the politeness systems within which interlocutors are interacting. Therefore, teachers must make students aware of the fact that politeness systems contribute to the determination of the rights and obligations of the Conversational Contract (Fraser and Nolen 1981) that they may establish with other individuals. Some of these rights and obligations are related to what they are expected or allowed to say in specific circumstances. In fact, concerning the usage of phatic utterances in the UK and USA, politeness systems constrain the type of such utterances interlocutors may resort to (Laver 1974, 1975, 1981). Hence, some of their types are permitted or adequate options in very specific circumstances and are normally regarded as polite, whereas others are dispreferred or excluded options and considered impolite. For this reason, when presenting a type of linguistic expression in the ESL class, teachers should check if its usage is affected by specific sociocultural conventions or the existence of certain social relationships between interlocutors in the target culture. If this happens, they should also explain them to students and emphasise that, if they obey them, they will avoid a misinterpretation or an undesired evaluation of their behaviour and will be perceived as polite.

By being polite, individuals implicitly communicate that they are aware of the constraints of social interaction and that they acknowledge and respect specific social relationships, since politeness resides on a rational assessment of the social context in which individuals are interacting and the selection of the linguistic expression that best matches that social context. However, such rational assessment should not be exclusively restricted to a search for the expression that is adequate to a particular predetermined social context. The interlocutors' interactive goals can comprise the establishment or maintenance of their social relationships, but also their redefinition. Consequently, teachers should also mention that their linguistic behaviour does not only necessarily have to be adapted to the existing social context that they perceive, but may also be aimed at matching other goals, such as modifying and/or redefining their social relationships. Therefore, they could also comment on the fact that the selection of a dispreferred type of phatic utterance might not necessarily be

evaluated negatively, but as an attempt to change a specific relationship into a different one or momentarily modify aspects of the existing one. Thus, for instance, in the case of an already existing deference politeness system, a self-oriented phatic token may not be regarded as impolite, but be understood as a movement towards temporary solidarity. The same would apply in a hierarchical system if the superior individual uses the same type of phatic utterance for addressing the inferior.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have presented three different approaches that may help teachers explain in the ESL class how, when and why phatic utterances can be (im)polite. None of them is better than the others, as each of them is based on a different conception of a rather complex phenomenon such as politeness. On the contrary, if anything, these three approaches would be complementary, for each contributes interesting insights into the cultural and sociopragmatic factors intervening in the production and interpretation of these linguistic expressions that could benefit their teaching. Nonetheless, the three of them have advantages and disadvantages.

As has been seen, the face-saving approach rests on the assumption that performing some acts or using some linguistic expressions can have negative consequences for social interaction because they may involve some damage to the interlocutors' faces or enhance social interaction because they satisfy their face needs. However, teachers should emphasise that no action or utterance is inherently, and in a decontextualised manner, (im)polite or can be considered as a face-threatening or face-enhancing act, for this depends on the context where it is produced and interpreted, as well as on the interlocutors' social identity. Consequently, teachers should make students aware of the necessity of evaluating the contextual factors and sociological variables conditioning and intervening in social interaction before deciding about the (in)convenience of using phatic utterances and choosing a concrete type of phatic utterance.

On the other hand, the conversational-maxim approach assumes the existence of interactive principles that justify the adequacy of phatic utterances in some circumstances. Similarly, the appropriateness approach takes for granted the existence of a knowledge about conventions governing the use of specific utterances in particular situations or depending on the nature of the interlocutors' social relationship. Since the individuals belonging to the target culture would acquire those principles and conventions as a result of their growing up in it, teachers could make explicit reference to them in the ESL class as a way to make students acquainted with them and prevent them from making undesired *pragmatic failures* (Thomas 1983). Nevertheless, such

explicit reference could lead students to see in the teachers' praxis an invasion of their own system of cultural beliefs and personal values, and feel that the teachers' purpose, far from avoiding unwanted misunderstandings, is to enforce behavioural patterns different from their own ones.

For these reasons, teachers should be careful in order to be perceived as providing students with the necessary linguistic and cultural knowledge that allows them to interact in the L2 just in the way they think most convenient and adequate for a specific situation. In spite of this, what teachers can certainly do is to point out the potential consequences arising from the students' decision (not) to use phatic utterances, their selection of a specific type of phatic utterances or their contravention of the interactive principles or conventions conditioning their usage in the target culture. This is not an easy and quick task, for students will need time to come to certain conclusions about the factors, principles and conventions affecting the usage of these utterances in English. However, teachers may make students develop some metapragmatic abilities that enable them to determine the (in)adequacy of specific phatic utterances to particular communicative situations by means of activities that allow them to interact in contexts close to the sociocultural reality that they may find outside the ESL class, permit them to use the L2 for specific personal purposes and contribute to the acquisition of the necessary interactive background that helps them face new sociocultural situations.

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