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POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH PARLIAMENTARY SETTINGS

As Escandell-Vidal (1996) points out, there have been important changes in the way language use has been studied. For several years, politeness mechanisms have been considered to be universal but investigations carried out on different cultures have revealed that this is not the case. There is a great amount of variation across cultures not only in the linguistic forms but also in the strategies they use in verbal interaction.

Facing this change, my aim here is to show to what extent the specific behaviour of a specific culture does impinge on its language. To this purpose, I have restricted my study to a particular social setting and then I have contrasted the results in two different languages. In fact, I will analyse the specific linguistic strategies used by English and Spanish politicians in Parliament.

I have chosen this setting for two reasons. First of all because this is a social event which is controlled by very specific rules of behaviour and so it could show important differences and/or similarities between these two cultures with regard to: (a) what values are selected in order to formalise these rules of behaviour; (b) how politicians depart from or adhere to these rules; and (c) how is language manipulated in order to achieve some political ends. And secondly because as Wilson puts it "... politicians' language does not merely convey the message, but creates for the listener a controlled cognitive environment from which any interpretation is manipulated" (1991, p. 11).

Finally, I hope this paper offers some empirical evidence about the universality or specificity of some politeness mechanisms.

KEY WORDS: politeness strategies, parliamentary discourse, verbal interaction, cultural differences.

1. Introduction

When speaking about the universality of the strategies individuals use in social interactions, I think that the first issue which should be clarified is: When can we say that a strategy is universal? Which are the parameters we have to use in order to state this universality? The answers to these questions could be as numerous as different.

For example, if we asked somebody to think about how s/he would describe a car s/he has to sell, the first thing s/he would say is: "Well, who is the person I am supposed to be speaking to: is s/he a shop assistant, somebody I do not know, or a friend of mine who wants to buy a car?" There are numerous situational factors which make us use some specific strategies and not others. But if we were to carry out this survey,

we would surely arrive at the conclusion that most of us would have used different utterances even though we all somehow share the same cultural backgrounds. So, why is it then that although sharing the same goal or task (i.e. to sell something), the same situation (i.e. the one we could have established) and the same cultural backgrounds we would have used different linguistic forms?

As Escandell (1996, p. 634) explains, there are three basic assumptions shared by all cognitive theories: (1) the mind is a symbolic system made up by a set of assumptions; (2) human knowledge is a complex network of sets of organised items and (3) perception, behaviour and understanding depend crucially on previous knowledge. So, it is to be expected that different individuals, although sharing the same cultural backgrounds, select different values out of their particular set of representations when constructing their strategies because “. . . one organises knowledge on the basis of one’s experience of the world, and uses this knowledge to predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events and experiences.” (Escandell 1996, p. 635). This would explain why we can find a great amount of variation across cultures not only in the linguistic forms but also in the strategies they use in verbal interactions¹. And this would also justify why two individuals who share the same cultural backgrounds will have much more in common than two from another community.

Facing this situation, my aim here is to show to what extent the specific behaviour of a specific culture does impinge its language. To this purpose, I have selected two parallel situations

where the only difference is the cultural and linguistic backgrounds. In fact, I have restricted my study to a particular social setting where all the interactants also share, at least in theory, the same goal or task: to elicit some kind of information from his/her addressee. In fact, I will analyse the specific linguistic strategies used by English and Spanish politicians in Parliament at Question Time. Even though the data is somehow limited, the results will help us to shed new light into this issue. The main goal of this case study is not to offer an exhaustive list of all the politeness strategies used by politicians in the House of Commons and *Parlamento de Andalucía* but to open our eyes to the existence of important differences.

2. Analysis

In order to carry out this study I followed the subsequent steps:

(1) I collected the data from two Official Reports: (a) *Diario de Sesiones (1995) Parlamento de Andalucía. Sesión Plenaria n° 33, IV Legislatura*. 13th December, n° 63, pages 3686-3720. And (b) *Hansard (1996) Parliamentary Debates (Oral Answers) House of Commons Official Reports*. 27th February, vol. 272, n° 58, pages 703-716. It is important to note that I took into consideration that they were as close in time as possible in order to avoid differences which could be due to stylistic characteristic of that period of time and not to idiosyncratic differences.

(2) I restricted my study to the same number of questions in each corpus: 14.

(3) As I realised that the answers to the Spanish questions were much lengthier than the English

¹ For example, in a contrastive study carried out by Nwoye (1992, p. 327), this author concludes that: “Evidence from parallel studies such as those of Strecker (ms.) in Ethiopia, Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1989) on Japanese, as well as Gu (1990) on Mandarin suggests that both politeness phenomena in general, and the notions of face in particular are perceived and manifested in different ways in these cultures.”

ones, I counted the words in each corpus so that each answer had the same number of words.

(4) Then I looked for the following features² which could show some similarities and /or differences between both corpora: supplementaries³, yes/no questions, wh- or content questions, verbs and personal pronouns used in the questions, pre- and post-sequences, and rhetorical questions.

(5) Then I rated the frequency of these features in each corpus and/or how they had been expressed in each language.

(6) And finally, I analysed the reasons which had made these parliamentarians behave in different ways in those cases where contrasts had been appreciated.

The first difference I noticed when analysing the way parliamentarians add supplementaries to the questions they had previously posed is that whereas British ministers preferred to use questions, the Spanish ones preferred to present their personal opinions about the subject matter they are dealing with and only then to put forward their questions. In fact, all the questions analysed in the Spanish corpus were found many more lines beyond the limits pre-established for this analysis. Despite this, they were taken into account because they revealed important ideas about the strategies used by these politicians.

However, these parliamentarians not only differed in the steps they followed when posing their questions, but even in the ways these had

Table 1: *Differences between British and Spanish parliamentarians*

	BRITISH	SPANISH
SUPPLEMENTARIES	Questions	Presentation of personal opinions + question
YES/NO QUESTIONS	92.9 %	31.2 %
WH- OR CONTENT QUESTIONS	7.1 %	68.8 %
PERSONAL PRONOUNS USED IN THE QUESTIONS	“He” Conventional honorifics: “The Secretary of State”; “My right hon.”; “The Minister”; “My right hon. Gentleman”	“ <i>Usted</i> ” The specific verbal endings indicating an implicit “ <i>usted</i> ”
PRE- AND POST-SEQUENCES	_____	Post-sequences: “ <i>Yo le quisiera hacer una reflexión y una pregunta</i> ”; “ <i>Y yo se lo pregunto</i> ”; “ <i>Dígame usted</i> ” Pre-sequence: “ <i>Dígalo</i> ”
QUESTIONS BEING ANSWERED BY THE QUESTIONER	_____	3

² Although I previously took into consideration more features, I finally restricted my study to these ones because: (a) they showed differences which were much more noticeable and so they would take us to clearer outcomes; (b) I thought that these factors were directly connected to the expression of the self -and so they could show differences and/or similarities between behavioural factors in both cultures; and (c) I thought it would be better to delimit the features to be analysed so that the study were more precise.

³ Or follow-up questions a minister poses when s/he feels his/her question has not been fully answered and so s/he asks for further information.

been put forward. Whereas the British parliamentarian preferred to use a closer type of questioning (i.e. the yes/no class), the Spanish one used much more frequently the more open type (i.e. the wh- or content class). In fact, whereas 92.9 % of the questions used by the British politicians were yes/no questions, the Spanish ones only used this type of questions 31.2 % of the instances. In the English corpus, the following questions were found:

- (1) "Does the Secretary of State appreciate ...?"
- (2) "Does the right hon. Gentleman realise ...?"
- (3) "Will the right hon. Gentleman join ...?"
- (4) "Does the Minister accept ...?"
- (5) "Is he aware that ...?"
- (6) "Does he agree that ...?"
- (7) "Does my hon. Friend agree that ...?"
- (8) "Will he ensure that ...?"
- (9) "Is my right hon. Friend aware that ...?"
- (10) "Would it not be better if ...?"
- (11) "Would it not be helpful ...?"
- (12) "Does my hon. Friend agree that ...?"
- (13) "Does my hon. Friend agree that ...?"
- (14) * "What plans are there to provide ...?"⁴

In the Spanish corpus, the following questions were found⁵:

- (1) "¿Por qué no se han celebrado ...?"
- (2) "¿Cómo puede anunciar ...?"
- (3) "¿Cómo puede decir ...?"
- (4) "¿Pero cómo es posible ...?"
- (5) "¿Cómo es posible ...?"
- (6) * "¿Le parece ético presentarles ...?"
- (7) "¿Cómo les explica ...?"
- (8) "¿Cuáles son las consecuencias ...?"

- (9) "¿En qué se ha plasmado ...?"
- (10) "¿Qué medidas en torno al ...?"
- (11) "¿Dónde está el ...?"
- (12) * "¿Es que la economía andaluza ...?"
- (13) * "¿Es que los últimos datos ...?"
- (14) * "¿Son eso, indiscutiblemente, razones ...?"
- (15) "¿Qué ha ocurrido en este tercer ...?"
- (16) * "¿Me quiere usted decir qué me va a decir ...?"

This makes us wonder to what extent these politicians use the same type of strategies when trying to trigger some information. First of all, it seems as if the British parliamentarians were more interested in just trying to get some information about a specific matter and not so much in presenting their personal opinions, as it is the case in the Spanish supplementaries. Secondly, the preference for yes/no questions among the British politicians would implicate that they make use of questions with a much higher degree of threat to the addressee's face⁶ because, whereas the content questions imply a much wider spectrum of possibilities, the yes/no questions delimit so much these possibilities that the addressee's face is threatened. This is even reinforced by the fact that most of the verbs⁷ used in all these questions are asking about the personal position which the addressee holds. These verbs enquire either if the addressee is conscious of the problem or if s/he agrees with the addresser's position. These ways to pose questions are both ironic and highly threatening to the addressee's face. The strategy pursued is explained as follows: it is obvious that the

⁴ This is the only case of a content question which was found.

⁵ The asterisks indicate yes/no questions.

⁶ Or individual self-esteem. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 13) explain this concept as follows: ". . . [face] consists of two specific kinds of desires ('face-wants') attributed by interactants to one another: the desire to be unimpeded in one's actions (negative face), and the desire (in some respects) to be approved of (positive face)."

⁷ These verbs are: appreciate, realise, join, accept, is aware that (twice), agree (4 times) and ensure.

minister to whom this question is addressed must be aware of what is going on in his/her ministry, so the real reason for a question of this sort is to put the minister in a risky situation where he only can answer either “No, I have no knowledge about such a problem” or “Yes, I know the problem”. But both answers damage the minister’s face and oblige him/her to add good reasons to his/her answer. In the case of a negative answer, it would mean that this minister is not in touch with the problems of his/her ministry, and in the case of a positive answer, it would mean that although s/he is aware of these problems the fact of having been asked about his/her awareness implies that he must be ignoring them.

Additionally, in order to mitigate the risk, the questioner uses another strategy to remain him/herself distant from his/her action. S/he does not use the second person pronoun “you” when posing his/her question but rather a third person form (“he”) or even conventional forms such as: “the Secretary of State, my right hon. Gentleman, the Minister, my right hon.” and so on. In this way, the distance between addresser and addressee increases and so this particular use of the personal pronoun system is used as a negative politeness strategy⁸. Although it has to be mentioned that when an MP asks a question to a Minister s/he *has to* use this form (it is compulsory⁹), the fact of having this rule makes an interesting difference between both Parliaments.

In contrast to this behaviour, the Spanish politicians preferred to use other strategies in

order to accomplish their parliamentary goals. First of all, as it was previously said, these ministers preferred the more open wh- or content question type so that the degree of threat to the addressee’s face is lower. But also in contrast to the procedures used by the British politicians, the Spanish ones preferred to employ the polite form of the second person pronoun “*usted*”¹⁰ or just the specific verbal ending which indicates the usage of an implicit “*usted*”. So, in contrast to what we could see before, now, the questioner addresses the hearer in a much more direct way than the British did. So, in this way, the addressee’s face is put into jeopardy because s/he is being questioned in such a direct way that the full responsibility of the answer is his/hers.

Also in contrast to the British way of putting forward the questions, the Spanish politicians made use of some specific pre and post sequences which clearly threatened the addressees’ faces because they left the addressees no choice but to answer the question. These pre-sequences are for example: “*Yo le quisiera hacer una reflexión y una pregunta*” (“I would like to make a comment and ask you a question”); “*Y yo se lo pregunto*” (“And I ask it to you”); “*Dígame usted*” (“You, tell me”) and a post-sequence such as “*dígalo*” (“Say it”). In this case, the degree of imposition is increased with the use of an imperative verbal form which puts the addressee into an extreme position of jeopardy. Consequently, the distance between S and H is reduced; a phenomenon contrary to the one we have just appreciated in the British corpus.

⁸ Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 70) define negative politeness as follows: “Negative politeness, thus, is essentially avoidance-based, and realizations of negative politeness strategies consist in assurances that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action. Hence negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to very restricted aspects of H’s self-image, centring on his want to be unimpeded.”

⁹ Because all questions are addressed to the Speaker.

¹⁰ As in French, there is a “*tu/vous*” distinction in the Spanish pronominal system: the form “*tú*” being used in informal contexts and the form “*usted*” in formal ones.

And finally, another difference is related to the real function of these questions. In the case of the British questions, no answers were provided by the same person who put forward the question; but I found three cases in the Spanish corpus where the person who posed the question also answered it. So, the usage of rhetorical questions among Spanish politicians is much more common than among the British. So, in these cases, the purpose of these questions is not so much to seek information but to present the questioner's opinions about the matter; and this tendency among Spanish parliamentarians to express their own opinions whenever it is possible was also previously signalled.

3. Conclusion

So, as we have been able to check in this case study, although both of them (i.e. the British and

the Spanish politician) looked for the means to put his/her addressee into jeopardy, the strategies each one employed differed in important ways. And thus we can agree with Escandell (1996, p. 647) when she states that:

“The conception of interpersonal relations (i.e. of distance and power) and the notion of face (with its positive and negative sides) are constitutive parts of any politeness system; again, the differences between cultures depend on different selections for their values.”

That is, there are universals in the existential characteristics of human conditions (O'Driscoll 1996, p. 5): human beings engage in interpersonal relations and as a consequence of this they make use of strategies in order to get specific goals; and human beings also have positive and negative wants they have to satisfy, but its constituents and the selection they make of them is culture-specific.

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MANDAGUMO STRATEGIJOS ANGLŲ IR ISPANŲ PARLAMENTINĖJE APLINKOJE**Santrauka**

Kaip pabrėžia Escandell-Vidalis (1996), įvyko svarių pasikeitimų kalbos vartojimo studijose. Nors jau keletus metus mandagumo mechanizmai laikomi universaliais, tačiau įvairiose kultūrose atlikti tyrimai parodė, kad taip nėra. Pastebimi dideli ne tik lingvistiinių formų, bet ir strategijų, kurios vartojamos verbaliniame bendravime, kultūriniai skirtumai.

Šio darbo tikslas yra parodyti kaip tam tikras kultūrinis elgesys paveikia kalbą. Dėl šios priežasties tyrimas atliktas tam tikroje socialinėje aplinkoje ir gauti rezultatai palyginti, pasitelkus dvi skirtingas kalbas. Lyginamos tam tikros anglų ir ispanų politikų lingvistinės strategijos, vartojamos parlamente.

Parlamentinė aplinka buvo pasirinkta dėl dviejų priežasčių. Pirma, parlamentas yra toks socialinis reiškinys, kuriame galioja nustatytos elgesio taisyklės, taigi tikėtina, kad tai atskleis svarbius kultūrinius skirtumus ir/ ar panašumus, susijusius su tuo: a) kokios vertybės yra pasirinktos tam, kad šios elgesio taisyklės būtų formalizuotos; b) kaip politikai laikosi ar nesilaiko šių taisyklių; c) kaip manipuluojama kalba, norint pasiekti tam tikrų politinių tikslų. Antroji priežastis yra nusakoma Wilsono: „Politikų kalba ne tik perteikia žinią, bet ir sukuria klausytojui kontroliuojamą kognityvinę aplinką, kurioje manipuluojama bet kokia interpretacija“ (1991, p. 11).

Tikimasi, kad šis darbas pateikia tam tikrų empirinių įrodymų apie mandagumo mechanizmų universalumą ar specifiškumą.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: mandagumo strategijos, verbalinis bendravimas, kultūriniai skirtumai.

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STRATEGIE GRZECZNOŚCIOWE W ANGIELSKIM I HISZPAŃSKIM OTOCZENIU PARLAMENTARNYM**Streszczenie**

Jak zaznacza Escandell-Vidalis (1996), w badaniach nad użyciem języka zaszły istotne zmiany. Mimo iż od kilku lat mechanizmy językowych zachowań grzecznościowych uważa się za uniwersalne, jednak badania przeprowadzone w różnych kulturach dostarczyły innych wniosków. Występują duże różnice kulturowe dotyczące nie tylko form językowych, ale też strategii stosowanych w interakcjach werbalnych. Celem niniejszego opracowania jest więc pokazanie, w jaki sposób określone zachowanie kulturowe wpływa na język. Z tego względu badanie przeprowadzono w specyficznym otoczeniu społecznym, a otrzymane wyniki zostały zestawione w dwóch różnych językach. Analizie poddano określone strategie językowe stosowane przez angielskich i hiszpańskich polityków w parlamentach.

Otoczenie parlamentarne wytypowano z dwóch powodów. Po pierwsze, parlament jest takim zjawiskiem społecznym, w którym obowiązują określone zasady zachowania, może więc ono uwidocznić ważne różnice i/lub podobieństwa kulturowe, a mianowicie: (a) jakie wartości zostały wybrane w celu sformalizowania takich zasad zachowania; (b) jak politycy przestrzegają lub nie przestrzegają tych zasad; (c) w jaki sposób manipuluje się językiem w celu osiągnięcia określonych celów politycznych. Drugi powód został wyrażony przez Wilsona (1991, s. 11) następująco: „Język polityków nie tylko przekazuje informację, ale i tworzy dla słuchacza kontrolowane otoczenie kognitywne, w której manipuluje się jakakolwiek interpretacją.“

Wreszcie, mam nadzieję, że niniejsze opracowanie przedstawia pewne empiryczne dowody uniwersalności lub specyficzności mechanizmów językowych zachowań grzecznościowych.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: strategie grzecznościowe, dyskurs parlamentarny, interakcje werbalne, różnice kulturowe.

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