The Grammatical Expression of Politeness in Tapirapé*

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We argue in this paper that Tapirapé, an indigenous language of Mato Grosso State, Brazil, makes use of negative politeness strategies, which can be observed through a break in person hierarchy rules (1>2>3) commonly observed in Tupí-Guarani languages. Our hypothesis is that such a break occurs in situations in which the speaker intends to mitigate his/her position of superiority over his/her listener.

Key-words: Tapirapé, person hierarchy, politeness, face.
Introduction
Tapirapé, as well as other indigenous languages of South America, displays a linguistic phenomenon known in the literature as “reference hierarchy” or “person hierarchy”\(^1\), whose breaking, we argue, may be interpreted as a face-saving strategy\(^2,3\). Verbs in this language, even if transitive, have only one argument position, regardless of the number of participants in the interaction. The filling of this position is done preferably by the highest person in the hierarchy, which, in Tapirapé is \(1>2>3\). Even if the 2\(^{nd}\) or the 3\(^{rd}\) person is the Agent and the 1\(^{st}\) is the Patient, it is the 1\(^{st}\) person that will be marked in the verb. We note, however, that this rigid rule may be broken for the sake of face-saving. Our data show that asymmetric interactions can be mitigated by means of the promotion of the 2\(^{nd}\) person affix to the gap that would be filled by the 1\(^{st}\) person affix, in situations in which the speaker feels he could make his/her hearer ill at ease or intimidated. Thus, instead of saying, “I will help you”, Tapirapé speakers will say something that could be freely translated as “You will be helped by me”. Such phenomenon leads us to argue that negative politeness strategies\(^4\) are strongly observed in this language.

This paper is structured as follows: in section 2, we present the classical views of face and politeness, as well as an alternative approach to such notions; section 3 is divided in three parts—“Person Hierarchy”, “Person Marking System” and “A Sequence”—and it describes the way politeness is, at least to some extent, grammaticalized in the morphosyntax of Tapirapé; section 4 brings the perspectives of the research on politeness and face and more specifically the perspectives of our study of the grammatical expression of politeness in Tapirapé.

2. An Interaction Ritual: Face and Politeness
This section is structured as follows: in 2.1, we present the classical views of politeness and face, as well as an alternative approach to such concepts.\(^5\)

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\(^{5}\) For a deeper discussion on the classical as well as on the revisited views of face and politeness, see Vicente, H. As Noções Pragmáticas de Polidez e Face e Sua Contribução para o Estudo de Crenças. In: Silva, K. A. (Org.). Crenças, Discursos e Linguagem. Campinas: Pontes, 2010.
2.1 Face and Politeness: Classical Views

The notions of ‘politeness’ and ‘face’ are usually dealt with together; however, one can think of them as being dissociable if bearing in mind that face is something you *have*; politeness, on the other hand, is something you *do*. In other words, politeness, in an interaction, can be defined as the means we use to show awareness of the other’s face. The term ‘face’ was introduced by the Canadian sociologist Ervin Goffman (1959) in the 1950’s and it derives from the idiom “to lose face” (in the sense of being humiliated) and it is related to the public self-image every individual has.

In Brown & Levinson’s (henceforth B&L) model, every individual has a positive and a negative face, which respectively correspond to (i) the urge to belong to a certain group, and (ii) the urge to be respected and treated with deference. The authors briefly mention the possibility of cross-cultural variation as far as the content of face is concerned, but they argue in favor of the universality of face as a public self-image. The following examples, taken from Yule (p. 60), respectively illustrate negative and positive faces:

(1) a. Excuse me, Mr Buckingham, but can I talk to you for a minute?
   b. Hey, Bucky, got a minute?

In the first situation, the speaker acknowledges the social distance between him/her and his/her addressee by means of the choice of linguistic cues that denote respect and deference. In the second situation, on the other hand, the cues denote close friendship or camaraderie. Thus, we can say that for each situation the speaker is aware of the addressee’s face wants (negative in the first example; positive in the second one).

B&L refer to the subjects of an interaction as MPs (‘Model Persons’), classifying them into S (‘speaker’) and H (‘hearer’, ‘addressee’). The MP, according to them, corresponds to the willful fluent speaker of a natural language, endowed with two special properties: rationality and face. The authors define these properties as follows:

By ‘rationality’ we mean something very specific—the availability to our MP of a precisely definable mode of reasoning from ends to the means that will achieve those ends. By ‘face’ we mean something quite specific again: our MP is endowed with two

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particular wants—roughly, the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects. (B&L, 1987 [1978], p. 58).

Having this in mind, one can posit the question: How does this subject—a willful fluent speaker of a natural language, endowed with rationality and face—use language? The answer, according to the authors, is: cooperatively. Generally, there seems to be a tacit agreement between interactants in a communication in the sense that they are cooperating with each other. Therefore, the face preservation of the speaker strongly relies on the face preservation of the hearer and vice-versa. In this respect, Goffman claims that:

Some practices will be primarily defensive and others primarily protective, although in general one may expect these two perspectives to be taken at the same time. In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others. (Goffman, 1955, p. 15).

To sum up, an interaction, being a cooperative process, is based on what B&L call the “mutual vulnerability of face”.

Every interaction is composed of acts which intrinsically threaten face—either positive or negative, either the speaker’s or the hearer’s. By ‘act’ B&L mean everything one intends to perform by means of verbal or non-verbal interactions. An FTA (‘face threatening act’) is something that damages both the speaker’s or the hearer’s face wants. Bearing in mind that every interaction is cooperative, if an act threatens the hearer’s face, it will possibly threaten the speaker’s face as well.

2.2 Face and Politeness Revisited

In this paper, we follow O’Driscoll’s assumptions, according to which B&L’s model can be used universally, as long as some adjustments are made to it. We claim that O’Driscoll is successful in his attempt to show that positive and negative face as well as positive and negative politeness can be viewed as universal traits and can even work as useful tools in the analysis of cross cultural data. According to him, neither positive nor negative face are primitive concepts, but compound notions derived from the combination of face—being understood as a more general concept—and ‘wants dualism’, that is, the need to be accepted by a group on one side and the need to be isolated on the other.
(2) Positive and negative face revisited (O’Driscoll’s model)

\[
\text{face} + \text{positive wants} = \text{positive face} \\
\text{face} + \text{negative wants} = \text{negative face}
\]

Both positive and negative face would be related to a notion the author calls ‘background consciousness’, as he assumes no one seeks the satisfaction of their face wants consciously: “They are simply wants which people are driven to satisfy”. On the other hand, a third reflex of face, ‘culture-specific face’, posited by the author, would involve ‘foreground consciousness’ and, therefore, vary from one culture to another. Having established the three reflexes of face (positive, negative, culture-specific face), it is easy to reach the conclusion that the constituents of positive and negative face cannot vary from culture to culture, since they are inherent to the human condition.

3. The Grammatical Expression of Politeness in Tapirapé

Before we proceed to the description of the grammatical expression of politeness in Tapirapé, in 3.2, we find it necessary to discuss, in 3.1, a linguistic phenomenon present in most Tupí languages: person hierarchy. We have been arguing that this language can express negative politeness by means of the breaking of person hierarchy rules. In order to illustrate this claim, in 3.3 we transcribe an interaction between Tapirapé native speakers and a speaker of Tapirapé as a second language. In the sequence, we note a mistake made by the non-native speaker can be considered both structural and pragmatic.

3.1 Person Hierarchy

Person hierarchy is a subtype of referential hierarchy, proposed by Foley and Zwicky. According to these authors, noun phrases possess inherent referentiality and organize hierarchically in a sentence. This hierarchic organization can be displayed in different ways by languages, ranging from word order and case marking to person coding. Foley proposes the existence of a universal referential hierarchy 1>2>3, structured as follows:

(3) Universal referential hierarchy (Foley, 1976)

\[
\text{Speaker}>\text{hearer}>\text{proper noun (human)}>\text{proper noun (human)}>\text{animate}>\text{inanimate}
\]

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According to Queixalós, referential hierarchy is one of the components of a salience gradient which relies on the egocentric organization of the human experience. Therefore, person hierarchy organizes the persons in discourse, placing intralocutory speech act participants, i.e., the first and second person, above interlocutory participants, i.e., the third person or the ‘non-person’—and then placing the speaker over the hearer.

Praça argues that person hierarchy in Tapirapé is conditioned by semantic as well as pragmatic reasons. The first person is hierarchically superior; however, in situations in which a confrontation between the speaker (the first person) and the listener (the second person) is about to occur, the hierarchy rule can—or even has to—be broken. By ‘confrontation situations’ we mean situations in which the hearer would somehow feel indebted to the speaker (see (4a) below) or in which a power asymmetry would be noticeable (see (4b) below).

In order to mitigate the confrontation, then, the verb prefixes – {ara-} and {ãpa-} –, both referring to the object, are added to the main verb, indicating a shift in prominence from the first to the second person, even if the latter is a Patience and the first is an Agent. {ara-} occurs when the Agent is a first person singular or an exclusive first person and the Patient is a second person singular, as in (4a); {ãpa-}, on the other hand, occurs when the Agent is a first person singular and the Patient is a second person plural, as in (4b):

(4) a. ara- pyro ekwe we-a-wo 'áwëxi-ø ø-pyyk-a
   2sg.IV-help F.IMI14 1sg.III-go-GER corn-REFER 3.II-get-GER
   “I will help you to get the corn” (lit: you will be helped by me to get the corn)15

b. ie-ø ãpa-nopë
   1sg-REFER 2plIV-hit
   “I hit you” (lit: you are hit by me)”

The breaking of person hierarchy rules has also been attested in other Tupí-Guarani languages. According to Monserrat & Facó Soares, such break occurs as a consequence of a

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11 Personal communication, 2006.
14 Imminent future.
15 Although the literal translations are in the passive voice, the reader should notice that the original sentences in Tapirapé do not display this structure (see the glosses).
semantic competition between first person and second person referents, in the specific relation *I*-subject/*you*-object. The main purpose of our paper is to argue that this break is already grammaticalized in Tapirapé and it occurs for the sake of saving the hearer’s (but also the speaker’s) negative face. In the next section we introduce the person marking system of Tapirapé, focusing on two specific series or paradigms (I and IV) which will be relevant to our claim that politeness is grammaticalized in this language.

3.2 The Person Marking System of Tapirapé

Person markers are omnipresent in Tapirapé. They are required by verbs and can be classified into six marks—three for the first person, two for the second person, and one for the third person—and into four paradigms also called ‘series’. The following chart shows the Tapirapé person markers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Series I</th>
<th>Series II</th>
<th>Series III</th>
<th>Series IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1sg</td>
<td>â-</td>
<td>xe</td>
<td>we- ~ wex-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1incl</td>
<td>xi-</td>
<td>xane</td>
<td>xere- ~ xerex-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1excl</td>
<td>ara-</td>
<td>are</td>
<td>ara- ~ arax-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2sg</td>
<td>ere-</td>
<td>ne</td>
<td>e- ~ ex-</td>
<td>ara- (1sg or 1excl → 2sg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2pl</td>
<td>pe-</td>
<td>pe</td>
<td>pexe- ~ pexex-</td>
<td>âpa- (1sg → 2pl)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>i- ~ ø- ~ t₁₇ ~ h₁₈</td>
<td>a- ~ w-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart 1: the person marking system of Tapirapé

The person markers of series I, III and IV are unstressed; those of series II, with the exception of the third person, are clitic pronouns, usually (but not always) unstressed. All four series morphemes are phonologically linked to themes and will not occur as phrase heads, only as modifiers. Series I and IV prefixes, the ones we are focusing on, occur exclusively in active verbs. Series I prefixes occur exclusively in active, intransitive verbs:

(5)  

á-yj  
râka  
â’ê  
nà=xè=r-âkwâr-i  
1sg.I-run  
PAS.REC  
CD  
not=1sg.II=R-slip-NEG  

“I ran and a did not slip”

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17. In general, this prefix corresponds to a human, undetermined third person.

18. This prefix only occurs with one-syllable themes starting with a vowel.
As for a transitive verb, regardless of its valency, there is only one morphological gap in the verb, and this means only one of the participants is marked. Thus, while series I prefixes mark the Agent (examples (6) and (7)), series II prefixes, on the other hand, mark the Patient (examples (8) and (9)).

(6)  xāwār-a  a-o’o  xe=r-eymāw-a  
     dog-REFER  3.I-bit  1SG.II=R-pet.animal-REFER  
     “the dog bit my hens”

(7)  â’ē  ekwe  a-xokā  
     CD  F.IMI  3.I-kill  
     “so (my father) will kill him”

(8)  āpī  korināka’i-ø  xe=o-mook  
     mommy  Korināka’i-  1SG.II=R-wet  REFER  
     “mommy, Korināka’i spilled water on me”

(9)  veva-ø  ne=r-arō  a-ka-wo  ka-pe  
     Veva-  2SG.II=R-wait  3.III-wait-GER  fields-LOC  REFER  
     “Veva is waiting for you in the fields”

Series IV prefixes, in turn, make reference to the object, indicating that the second person Patient is prominent over the first person Agent. The prefix {ara-} occurs when the Agent is a first person singular and the Patient is a second person singular, as seen in (4a), here repeated as (10). The prefix {āpa-} occurs when the Agent is a first person singular and the Patient is a second person plural, as seen in (4b), here repeated as (11):

(10)  ara-pyro  ekwe  we-a-wo  ’āwāxi-ø  o-pyyk-a  
      2sg.IV-help  F.IMI  1sg.III-go- corn-REFER  3.II-get-GER  
      “I will help you to get the corn” (lit: you will be helped by me to get the corn)
In Tapirapé, there is no other way in which to express the reference to the second person in cases as the ones illustrated above. The prefixes {ãpa-} and {ara-} form a special paradigm—that of series IV—and are used exclusively in such cases. As demonstrated, these prefixes point out the prominence of the Patient (second person) over the Agent (first person)—apparently violating person hierarchy rules—which, we claim, corresponds to one of the facets of the expression of negative politeness in this language.

3.3 A Sequence

Assuming recent theoretical advances in politeness theory which claim that no analysis of politeness phenomena can be built unless one takes bigger chunks of verbal interactions into consideration, we present the passage below, excerpted from Praça’s registers of one of the periods (May 2004) she spent among the Tapirapé people in Urubu Branco reserve, in Mato Grosso State, Brazil. The passage illustrates the hypothesis that the speaker is aware—in the sense of O’Driscoll’s background consciousness—of the listener’s need of having his/her negative face wants preserved. According to our claim, much of facework in Tapirapé is done by means of the breaking of the rigid person hierarchy generally observed in the Tupí languages.

(14) A sequence (Urubu Branco reserve, Mato Grosso State, Brazil, maio de 2004)

Language: Tapirapé

Interaction between two native speakers of Tapirapé and a speaker of Brazilian Portuguese:

• K1 Tapirapé, male child, 3 years old, only speaks Tapirapé.
• K2 Tapirapé, K1’s mother, 28 years old, speaks Tapirapé and (non-fluent) Brazilian Portuguese.
• WNP, researcher, 42 years old, native speaker of Brazilian Portuguese.

K1, a three-year-old Tapirapé boy, saw me as a family member, and I had a special affection for him. Early in the morning, he would wake me up and lie by my side waiting for
me to get up. Then, he would sit on my lap while I transcribed data, etc. However, I didn’t like him to lie in my hammock when he was dirty. I used to give him a bath when he got sleepy in the afternoon, after climbing trees and playing on the ground, and then I would let him sleep in my hammock.

One day, he simply refused to take a bath before going to sleep, and decided he wanted to play tag instead. I started chasing him and so we started to play. Other people, including his mother, K2, watched us, laughing and having fun. All of a sudden, however, I remembered I had an appointment with a native speaker consultant. So I decided to bathe Namĩ right away, because I knew he would end up sleeping in my hammock anyway. I stopped chasing him and I called him:21

(14a) namĩ,  e-xat         xe=ø-pyri

  namĩ,   2sg.IMP-come     1sg.II= R-POS

‘Namĩ, come here’ (lit: ‘come near me’)

And the more I called him, the more he ran and laughed. I stopped and said:

(14b) *  namĩ    ā-pyyk     ekwe   ne-mook-a

  namĩ   1sg.I-get   F.IMI    2sg.III-bathe-GER

‘Namĩ, I will get you to bathe you!’

Immediately, everybody stopped laughing. K2, very seriously and with an angry tone of voice, called K1. The boy ran to his mother at once and, at that moment, everybody started to disperse. I was left there without understanding what had happened. Sadly, I gathered my material in order to work with my consultant. Nobody said anything and I noticed Namĩ was sad, lying in his own hammock.

When I returned, K2 said to me: “There’s nothing I can do. Namĩ likes you. He wants to stay with you. He cried a lot because I took him from you”.

And she continued: “The thing is, you can’t go on talking bad Tapirapê. You’re smart and you’re getting to learn Tapirapê”.

20 Any three-year-old boy.
21 Abbreviations in the glosses are as follows: IMP: imperative; R-POS: relational posposition; F.IMI: imminent future; GER: gerund; CD: discursive connective; REF: referent.
Then, whispering in my ear, she repeated the following sentence:

(14c)  namĩ  *ara-pyyk*  ekwe  ne-mook-a  
       namĩ  2sg.IV-pegar  F.IMI  2sg.III-banhar-GER  

‘Namĩ, I will get you and bathe you.’ (lit: ‘Namĩ, you will be gotten by me and bathed.’)

K2 kept on whispering sentences in my ears so that I did not “embarrassed anybody else” (quoting her) until it was time to go to sleep.

As can be noticed, the correct sentence, whispered in WNP’s ears, should include series IV prefix {ara-}. We argue that this configuration, grammaticalized in the language, is associated with semantic and pragmatic requirements of the language, which establish politeness rules in the intralocutory domain. If, for some reason, someone uses series I first person prefixes in a situation such that confrontation is imminent, marking the Agent in the subject position instead of marking the Patient in the object position with {ara-} or {ãpa-}, s/he directly affects the politeness rules of the language, by making a mistake that is both structural and pragmatic.

4. Perspectives

It is our aim to deepen the discussion on politeness, having in mind that the notions of face and (im)politeness have evolved towards not being restricted to the study of strategies for the mitigation of face threatening acts. It is crucial that studies be carried out on the basis of the collection of bigger chunks of interactions like the one presented in (14). Our next step will be to investigate the expression of impoliteness in Tapirapê, since sentences containing mistakes—like the one uttered by the researcher in (14b)—are simply not attested in the language.
References


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