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POWER AND POLITENESS IN SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS:
A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS STUDY

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Abstract

A great deal of existing research has studied the distribution of power among individuals within different groups and cultures and has examined how this power relationship impacts the concept of politeness in communication. However, very few studies focus on power and politeness expressions as employed in school board meetings. This study aimed to fill this gap by producing a review of the linguistic implication of power and politeness in school board meeting in Kuwait. Through applying the basics of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory on politeness, this paper will describe the positive and negative politeness strategies that are typically employed in a communicative event .

A qualitative design was employed for this study and a structured observation was applied for collecting data. Our study adopts critical discourse analysis method (CDA) to analyze the collected data. The CDA is typically employed to help educators to understand the relationship between language and society. It investigates the relationship between text, context and language in a specific setting (Henderson, 2005). This study examined the discourse that occurred naturally during a school board meeting in Kuwait. Within this research the board meeting was viewed as a hierarchical situation that could be deemed to be representative of the way in which individuals exercise and adhere to power relationships. It was concluded that power and politeness co-occur in a context simultaneously. Power is a transactional factor between superiors and subordinates, also a dynamic factor that do not exist in all contexts. We find evidence that school is considered a rich-information resource for linguistic behavior studies.

Keywords: Power, Politeness, Kuwaiti expressions, School communication.

1. POWER AND POLITENESS:

Politeness in workplace communication is a dynamic social norm that has attracted a great deal of sociolinguistic research since the mid-1970s. As a direct result of the controversial role that power plays in communication, researchers have developed divergent views about the effect that an individual's status has on politeness. Arguing that power is expressed in language, Locher (2004) views politeness as a strategy that is employed to mitigate the effect of power. That is, speakers and listeners contemplate how to fulfill their needs while saving face among themselves (Locher, 2004). Brown and Levinson (1987) claimed that the power inherent in a situation prompts people to pre-select politeness strategies. Harris (2001) disputed their interpretation of power as a stable characteristic and argued instead that it is a dynamic, as opposed to pre-existing, aspect of interaction.

Sociolinguists have studied politeness and power in a number of institutional settings including courtrooms (Harris, 1989), hospitals, and the military (Halbe, 2011). However, few studies have examined the relationship between power and politeness in a school setting and, those that do, stress student-teacher interactions without considering principals, who exercise institutional authority over subordinate teachers. Like all institutions, schools function because their members communicate with each other during a myriad of language encounters, e.g., via conversations between teachers, through issuing instructions and advice, during faculty meetings and parent-teacher meetings, and in a social manner during lunch breaks.

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We share Harris' view that power is a dynamic factor of institutional discourse through which superiors (principals) during faculty meetings seek subordinates' (teachers) compliance in performing work tasks. Following Mullaney (2004), we regard meetings as ideal hierarchical settings for exploring the way in which power is exercised during workplace interactions. Accordingly, this research sought to identify how institutional power affects expressions of politeness among participants in school board meetings. We claim that power is a transactional factor,which sealed off through linguistic behavior.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) explanation of politeness strategies employed in exercising power is among the most influential studies. Watts and Locher (2005) praised them for opening the door to politeness studies and for providing "an enormous amount of research mileage" (as cited in Salazar, 2007, p.87). Although Brown and Levinson ignored institutional context and concentrated on specific types of discourse (Harris, 2003), this study embraced their work because power affects expressions of politeness in institutional settings and it can therefore be considered to represent a significant aspect of politeness phenomena (Lackoff & Jannen, 1979; Leech, 1980, 1983).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) study also has been criticized as being individualistic and Western-centered (Paramasivam, 2007). We adopted their model specifically because this study was concerned with institutional, not cultural, settings and examined institutional discourse, not casual daily discourse among individuals. Moreover, their study encompassed multiple dimensions of both negative and positive politeness strategies: social distance (D), exercise of power (P), and imposition ranking (R). Even so, we rejected their assumption that those strategies cannot attend discourse simultaneously. We agreed with Harris (2001) and Mills (2002), who "critique Brown and Levinson for viewing politeness as occurring only in single utterances" (Mullany, 2004, p.16). Hence we found critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Pateman, 1980; Fairclough, 1989, 1995) essential to producing a clear and valid analysis. This was a conclusion that was similarly endorsed by Holmes (1999).

To summarize, this research investigated verbal communication between principals and teachers. We analyzed the predominant expressions of power and politeness in use during Kuwaiti school board meeting. To answer the research question, we adopted Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and employed Fairclough's (1989) critical discourse analysis. Our study assessed the relation between power and politeness in female faculty meeting interactions and examined the extent to which the principal and teachers exercised power and politeness through discourse during a school board meeting.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study in which a structured observation used to collect data. The observation based on Brown and Levinson's strategies of politeness (see appendix.2), and Fairclough's three dimensional model (see Figure 2.2.1), in determining in advance what we are going to locate in the selected context (Shohamy,1987). By using these two models we tried to pinpoint the politeness strategies and the exercise of power in school board meeting. The selected context is a high school for girls in Mubarak Alkabeer educational area. The selection procedure processed purposefully.

2.1 Data Collection:

During the data collection process, and according to Jorgensen and Philips' (2002) recommendation, we sought to find contexts that mostly: (a) related to the research question; and (b) offered a high degree of accessibility to data. Moreover, this study is based on naturally occurring language as spoken by participants in official school board meeting in Kuwait. The school selection process was based on the need to collect the most appropriate data. Audio recordings were collected using iPhones. Note taking was conducted also, during the observation to assist the later data analysis exercise.

2.2 Data Analysis Procedure:

In discourse analysis studies there is no universally accredited process for analysis. Instead, the analysis is aligned with the purpose of the study and the social context within which the discourse was taken (Jorgensen and Philip, 2002).

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We chose two theoretical frameworks for analyzing the collected data. Firstly, we decided to adopt Fairclough's critical discourse analysis approach. Although this approach is commonly used to examine both non-linguistic features and linguistic features in a given context, we limited our study to an exploration of the linguistic features that affect the discursive and social practices evidenced during school board meeting. This study also applied Brown and Levinson's positive and negative strategies to politeness (for details see appendix 2).

We also adopted Fairclough's three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis. This model is constructed from: (a) formal linguistic features of discourse; (b) Processes implied in producing and consuming discourse; (c) the discipline or area within which a given communicative event occurs. Thus, this model, as the following figure shows, combined text, discursive practice and social practice in a specific context. Besides, a pilot study was conducted to determine the most commonly used expressions of power and politeness in Kuwaiti schools, and to help in understanding the observed data.

2.2.1 Fairclough's three- dimensional level:

During this study, and in terms of Fairclough's three-dimensional model, as Figure 2.2.1 shows, we analyzed the data in terms of three levels: text, discursive practice and social practice. The first level describes the formal linguistic features of a text in a given context, while the second level interprets how text is used and produced; and, the last level explains how text is used to indicate and identify notions of power. During the transcription procedure we applied the Koester (2005) and Holmes (1995) model, as used in Victoria (2009).
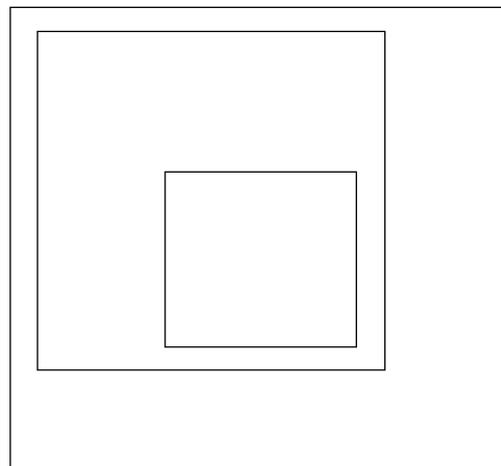
Figure 2.2.1 The three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis (Jorgensen and Philips, 2002 P.68) (based on Fairclough,1992 p.73)

In general, CDA tries to both describe and explain a given discourse in a given social context. This kind of discourse analysis has been called critical for its attempt to identify power relations within discourse. It studies the interrelationship between language and power.

Fairclough (1995) believes that ideological conflict can be presented through linguistic behavior. According to his theory, institutional discursive practice can be examined in terms of two main levels: the institutional level (i.e., authority of the institution), and the individual level (i.e., individual internal understanding of their institutional identity).

2.2.2 The Context:

The context of the research was a school board meeting in a high school in the Mubarak Alkabeer Educational area. The meeting was led by the vice principals (VPs) of the school because the

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principal was on sick leave. There are two VPs in Kuwaiti public schools, one for teacher affairs and employee affairs, and another for student affairs. This meeting was entirely managed by Ameena, the student affairs vice principal (VP1); Dalal, the second vice principal (VP2), remained largely inactive until the end of the meeting, at which point she displayed a high level of power possession, as will be seen later.

This meeting is a school weekly meeting aimed at discussing the school and students' current status and to track the teachers' and supervisors' performance and accomplishments in terms of the school plan. Although this meeting is a regular one that the board of the school is accustomed to attending, a noticeable feature was that the session that was observed was mostly used to discuss the employees' reflections on a recent visit from an evaluation committee. The meeting resembled a courtroom, which was led by a judge (VP1) who asked searching questions about what the board had done and why. We compared this meeting with a courtroom because VP1 frequent knocked on the table is an attempt to calm the participants down. This was obvious once she declared ironically "we need ALKHARAFII'S GAVEL," that is the gavel of the most well-known Kuwaiti assembly ex-president.

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

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1 VP1: (taking roll) PE department here. Science here, Arabic…

Teacher A:(laughing) We are Twinkling here. (emphasizing their commitment)

3   VP1: (???) (trying to start the meeting and stop interruptions) So, what then?

4   VP1: (excusing) The Principal delegated us to lead this meeting and she is very sorry for not being here to participate in this meeting.

5   (officially starting the meeting). In the name of Allah the most gracious and the most merciful.

Firstly, are we incapable of writing? (speaking in a sarcastic tone) So we need a rapporteur.

6   Teacher A : (disagreeing) But we didn't receive any written script for the previous meeting.

7   Teacher B: So we only take notes no need (???) (rejecting imposition)

8   VP1: Nooo=nooo, one moment, one moment. Don't you know how to write?

9   You don't know the right policy (???)///You don't even ask what to do.

10   Aisha please, you're the timer for this meeting. Each one has only 2 min. to talk (then justifying) to save time.

11   Amani? The rapporteur is busy (sarcastically)

12   Rapporteur: No= no//I'm listening.

13   VP1: Now we are going to talk about the recent visit of the evaluation committee to our school. We were supposed to see more cooperation and initiatives from you. No one take the lead?

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14   Teachers: We were waiting for your orders and directions

15   VP1: It's a very important issue; we have to be more careful and serious.

16   When we have visitors we should not wait for them to ask us about our school, we have to show them in advance our accomplishments in this school. (???) It's not preferable to be in a situation in which you are not prepared.

17   Teacher C: But we were busy
                                                        teaching the students.

18   VP1: I know. But you have to be well prepared (???) (simultaneous talk).

19   Please, may God bless you (an attempt to settle down the meeting).

20   Where is Sakina? (The computer sciences department's supervisor).

21   Teachers: She is absent.

22   VP1: No they have to be here. Go and call any one of their dept. Oh what a stunning dept. (sarcastically) They have to be blamed for this (complaining about their absence and carelessness).

23   Teacher A: This dept. is being attacked.

24   No= noooo=no, one moment. We are here to spot mistakes and learn from them// It is not only about this dept. We have to admit mistakes (???). We are humans, we don't seek perfection.

25   VP1: Now let's talk about the questionnaires that we regularly give to you. Please be more cooperative with us.

26   Teachers: Few teachers not taking this seriously.

27   VP1: The results of this procedure will end with decisions.

28   It is not acceptable that you as teachers don't know anything about your school, as the survey indicates. It is unbelievable.

                    Teacher A: Those who answered randomly are not serious.

                      Some teachers: Maybe they really know nothing about the school?

29   You have to be more honest///We are not asking you for suggestions or ideas, we just asked you to describe your school environment.

30   Some of the teachers' invalid papers is known to us now (???) all her department write with the right hand except her. So we knew it was her.

31   it's HONESTY that we have to take into account and imply.

32   (A supervisor pointing at VP2): Teacher Dalal, what about the excuses for some teachers?

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33   VP2: I have said it before, no more excuses and no more exceptions.

34   Teachers: what about sub-teachers (teachers take role of absent teachers).

35 VP2: You have to EXPECT being sub teacher at any time.

36   Teacher B & C: OK! We will accept just for your sake.

The participants of this meeting used Kuwaiti Arabic language (KAL) as a means of communication. They rarely spoke in the standard Arabic language (AL), which is somewhat different from KAL, so in our analysis we mostly depended on the pilot study results, our prior knowledge of the KAL and, to some extent, the commonalties that are shared between KAL and AL (i.e., pronouns and types of sentences).

VP1's use of the inclusive pronoun *you* positioned the teachers as her opponents. She tried to blame them for the weak evaluation presented by the committee after a visit to the school. Within Lines 8, 9, 10, 13, 16, 18, 25, 28, 29 and 31 she exercised her power. On the other hand, she tried to reduce this act by using the inclusive pronoun *we*, which reminded teachers that they were still part of the school. Furthermore, her frequent obligations to teachers, as apparent in lines 24, 29, 35 displayed her superiority to them and, in most cases; she activated her possession of power. The use of power in this meeting was hatched through text; for instance, as can be seen in the inclusive pronoun *you*, the frequent obligations and the negative presuppositions were expressed (Line 9).

The verbal process plays a dominant role in both exercising and rejecting power. The VPs used different tones to express different meanings; for instance, on Line 5, VP1 used the ironic tone " are we incapable of writing?" to impose teachers, on writing the meeting report. While in line 31, she uses an encouraging tone, to ask teacher to be more committed to their school duties.

At the discursive practice level, teachers mostly applied intertextuality through using informal language and casual style to reduce VP1's exercise of power. In contrast, VP1 practiced interdiscursivity, in which she introduced religious discourse to the context in order to remind teachers of the highly recommended religious obligation (i.e., honesty), as can be seen in Lines 29 and 31.

During this meeting, the social practice was mostly governed by the institutional level, not the individual level. The VPs regularly attempted to remind teachers of their affiliation to the school. They both used their granted delegation to encourage teachers to remain on the right track, for the school's sake. It is highly likely that this delegation made them more powerful and committed to the principal's plan. That might be the reason why they were more careful and cautious about what is done before and what is going to be done later.

The VPs' practice of power might be a reactive state to the teachers' failure to perform official duties during the evaluation committee's visit. Thus, their behavior in this meeting could be viewed as a temporal state as opposed to a static one. Power was clearly seen in this meeting, but might not be so prominent in another meeting with the same context.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The application of politeness is generally transactional in this meeting. In Line 10 VP1 used both negative and positive politeness. She gave justification for the limited time dedicated to each person as well as using the discourse marker *please*, and the use of the hedge *only*, which can be all viewed as negative politeness strategies. An example of positive politeness can be seen in Line 18, during which VP1 avoided disagreement with the teachers. Also, in Line 19 she gave a gift to the teachers by performing a prayer.

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VP1 started the meeting by taking roll and asking for the absent participants to be called. In Line 5 there was a clear intention from the VP1 to impose teachers, when she asks for a rapporteur. In Line 1, one teacher rejected the VP1's dominant entrance by using funny and exaggerated comments that served to reduce the exercise of power; this can be viewed as a positive politeness strategy.

VP1 reprimanded one of the teachers who had previously interrupted her by saying: "Don't you know how to write?" This clearly shows how a superior (VP1) can exercise power over her subordinates (the teacher), by threatening her face, something that Brown and Levinson refer to as a face-threatening act (FTA). VP2 intended to save the face of the school at the expense of the teachers' faces.

This study attempted to assess the application of power and politeness within institutional verbal interactions in Kuwait. We intended to explore how institutional power affects the use of politeness in both superiors' and subordinates' discourse. Fairclough's three-dimensional model was adopted to locate power through discourse, and Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness was applied to describe positive and negative politeness strategies.

A conflict of needs between the VP's negative face (i.e., the want to be not impeded) and the positive face of teachers (i.e., the want to be accepted) occurred during the meeting. Furthermore, the occurrence of disagreement provoked the exercise of power (Locher, 2004), and this was obvious when the VPs and some teachers fought to prove whom to be blamed for the school failure at the evaluation committee visit. VP1 decided to exercise power in this meeting in an attempt to blame teachers for their mistakes. Thus, this means that power is variable and not constant; power-holders decide to activate or deactivate power in accordance to the context. Holmes (2009) asserted that it is the power-holders that decide to what extent they declare power.

It is concluded that power and politeness are co-occurring in contexts. Politeness is a social norm used to mitigate power. Power can be simultaneously declared from superiors and subordinates. This proves that schools provide an adjustable context for the study of linguistics behaviors.

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Appendix 1.

Transcription Conventions

Adopted from Holmes (1995)

(as cited in Victoria,2009)

(???)   unintelligible text

//   a short pause

///   a slightly longer pause

.   Falling intonation at the end of unit.

?   High rising intonation

LISTEN   Words in capitals indicates *stressed words.*

{   }   Extended Brackets indicates Over lapping

=   Latching; no pause.

(shouting)   Transcriber's comments described in parenthesis.

Appendix 2.

Table 1

Positive Politeness and Negative Politeness Strategies derived from Brown and Levinson (1987) with constructed examples:

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Positive politeness strategies Negative politeness strategies

1. Be conventionally indirect: "Can you pass the salad, please?"
2. Question (tag), hedge: "I think the store's closed."
3. Be pessimistic: "I don't suppose there'd be any chance you have $50 with you now."
4. Minimize the imposition: "Can I borrow your pen for a minute?"
5. Give deference: "I am a little slow. Can you show me how to do that again?"
6. Apologize: "I'm sorry to bother you with this."
7. Impersonalize S and H: "It would be appreciated if the seat belt is fastened at this moment."
8. State the FTA as a general rule: "Drinking alcohol beyond this line is prohibited."
9. Nominalize: "It is our regret that we cannot permit your application this time."
10. Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H: "I'd be eternally grateful if you would help me with this."

Negative politeness strategies

1. Notice, attend to H: "What a beautiful dress you have!"'
2. Exaggerate: "Is this your drawing? How absolutely marvelous!"
3. Intensify interest to H: Use vivid present tense or exaggerate
4. Use in-group identity markers: 'There you go, honey."
5. Seek agreement: Talk about safe topics
6. Avoid disagreement: "I agree with you, but I also think..."
7. Presuppose/raise/assert common ground, gossip, small talk: "I have been struggling with this problem for a while, you know."
8. Joke: "My doctor told me to avoid cakes unless they are delicious." (S is on a diet.)
9. Assert or presuppose S's knowledge of and concern for H's wants: "I know you don't care for comedies, but this one is different."
10. Offer, promise: "I'll stop by soon, I promise."
11. Be optimistic: "You'll call us, won't you?" 12. Include both S and H in the activity (inclusive we): "Let's begin the demonstration.
13. Give (or ask for) reasons: "Why don't we do it now?"

Note. *(as mentioned in Al-Shalawi, 2000)*