



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Placencia, Maria Elena (1996) Politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish. *Multilingua - Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication* 15 (1), pp. 13-34. ISSN 1613-3684.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/4739/>

Usage Guidelines:

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html>
contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

or alternatively



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

Politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish

Journal Article

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/4739>

Version: Published (Refereed)

Citation:

Placencia, M.E. (1996)
Politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish
*Multilingua - Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage
Communication* 15(1), pp.13-34

© 1996 Walter de Gruyter

[Publisher version](#)

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

[Deposit Guide](#)

Contact: lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk

Politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish

MARÍA E. PLACENCIA

Abstract

This paper examines politeness phenomena in Ecuadorian Spanish as reflected in the language of telephone conversations, and, as such, attempts to add another cultural perspective to the discussion of politeness issues and of Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) much criticized theory, in particular. It highlights some of the difficulties involved in the application of Brown and Levinson's theory to actual conversational data in Ecuadorian Spanish, such as the frequent occurrence of strategy embeddedness, which brings into question their notions of positive and negative politeness strategies as clear-cut categories, and the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between certain forms and their politeness value, which poses problems for generalizations. It also explores the motivations behind participants' use of certain strategies and brings into question Brown and Levinson's notion of face. In addition, it considers some features of politeness at the macro-speech act level (cf. van Dijk 1977, 1980), which Brown and Levinson do not seem to take into account. Finally, it suggests that it might be fruitful to seek explanations for some aspects of linguistic politeness in fields that deal with social behavior and patterns of social interaction (e.g., social psychology and social anthropology). It nevertheless, also suggests that to arrive at a more adequate characterization and understanding of politeness phenomena in Ecuadorian Spanish, it might be useful to examine some aspects of its history and the development of what today constitute its key social institutions.

Background and aims

This paper is an attempt to provide yet another perspective on the discussion of politeness phenomena through the examination of conversational data in Ecuadorian Spanish, using Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of face as the framework of analysis.

Brown and Levinson's theory has received severe criticism on several counts in recent years, particularly in relation to the universality claims attached to it (cf., for example, Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1989; Gu 1990; Sifianou 1991; Nwoye 1992; Mao 1994). According to Ide (1989), Brown

and Levinson's theory is ethnocentrically biased towards Western languages. The notion of face, which rests at the center of their theory, is claimed to represent Western individuality whereas in non-Western societies there is often collective rather than individual orientation. So while Brown and Levinson stress within their notions of negative face and politeness that one of people's central needs or desires underlying interaction is that of preserving their individual territory, or as they put it, maintaining 'claims of territory' (1987: 70), Nwoye (1992: 310), for example, finds that in Igbo society, 'concern for group interests rather than atomistic individualism is the expected norm of behavior'.

Here I focus on some of the problems that arise in the application of Brown and Levinson's notions of positive and negative politeness, and ultimately, their notion of 'negative face'. I look at the frequent occurrence of strategy embeddedness in the data examined, which brings into question the notions of negative and positive politeness as clear-cut categories. I also examine variation in the politeness value of some utterances in relation to features of context, which presents problems for generalizations concerning politeness orientations, and variation in participants' motivations behind lexical choices, which brings into question the 'instrumentality' of interaction underlying Brown and Levinson's theory. In addition, I consider some features of politeness at the macrospeech act level (van Dijk 1977, 1980), rather than at the utterance level, which are not taken into account by Brown and Levinson.

Finally, I suggest it might be useful to seek some explanations for politeness phenomena within the fields of social psychology and social anthropology, which have the study of patterns of social behavior and networks of relationships, as central concerns. I also suggest the need to look at historical developments, social institutions and different aspects of what could be referred to as Ecuadorian Spanish speakers' cultural heritage in order to gain a better understanding of current modes of interaction.

Data examined and rationale

The data employed for analysis is the language of telephone conversations.¹ Telephone talk was chosen for examination in that it can provide a window on a number of features of conversational interaction both through what can be regarded as telephone-specific behavior, i.e., the language employed to manage telephone interactions, as well as through a range of other conversational activities that can be carried out over the phone. Concerning the former, as Godard (1977) and Sifianou (1989) have demonstrated, the examination of the initial turns of telephone conversations alone can reveal a

great deal about the way users in a particular society interact; and, in fact, Sifianou, in particular, has attempted to show that the analysis of the initial turns of these conversations can provide insights into patterns of politeness behavior for the society in question, which go beyond telephone interactions.

In the same fashion, in an earlier paper (Placencia 1992), I examined politeness strategies in Ecuadorian Spanish as manifested in the language of telephone conversations. I looked at the type of telephone conversations I referred to as mediated conversations,² that is, those conversations occurring between mediators or participants who are not aware of each other's social or occupational identity. The strategies that were found to predominate in these conversations were those corresponding to Brown and Levinson's negative politeness category. They included avoidance of the imposition as in the use of indirectness in different types of requests, acknowledgement of the imposition, as in the use of politeness formulae, as well as compensation for the imposition, as in the expression of deference through lexical choices. I suggested then, however, that Ecuadorian Spanish could not be branded as displaying a negative-politeness orientation since other types of conversations appeared to reveal the use of positive politeness strategies, too. Besides, I suggested that even if one could talk about the negative- (or positive-) politeness orientation of a society, it was necessary to specify which type of strategy predominated since being deferential, for example, is not the same as being indirect.

Here, I look at the language of non-mediated telephone conversations, or conversations between people who are aware of the other participant's identity. These conversations display the use of both positive and negative politeness strategies at different stages of the interaction, which, in fact, often occur simultaneously. This is one of the problems I discuss below. I, nevertheless, do not limit myself to the examination of initial turns only, as other scholars have done, but I look at different stages of the interaction, with particular focus on the opening and closing sections.

Apart from the language of telephone conversations, I also make some reference to observations I have made of linguistic (and non-linguistic) behavior in face-to-face interactions in Ecuadorian Spanish. For the purpose of illustrating certain points, on a few occasions I refer to British English and Peninsular Spanish data (Placencia 1991) as well.

Strategy embeddedness

Difficulties in implementing Brown and Levinson's notions emerged when attempting to assign a politeness value to the utterances examined. The categories and subcategories of positive and negative politeness that they propose

and which they appear to present as clear-cut were not always found to be so in the Ecuadorian Spanish data. Instead, strategy embeddedness, that is, the use of one type of strategy within the other was found to be of common occurrence. It was found that indirect procedures (i.e., negative politeness strategies in Brown and Levinson's classification) are usually employed to initiate and close telephone interactions, but that lexical choices within them can convey the use of a different type of strategy.

Concerning openings, one of the initial opening moves³ in telephone conversations can be that of confirming the identity of the other participant (cf. Schegloff 1979). In Ecuadorian Spanish, this move is sometimes realized through a 'self-questioning' utterance, as in (1), but more often through an abbreviated form of this type of utterance, consisting of a name produced with rising intonation as in (2) below. Both constitute indirect ways of asking the other participant 'Are you X?'

- (1) 06 C: *hablo con Luchita*⁴
am I speaking to Luchita⁵
- (2) 03 C: *aló María*[^]
telephone greeting María[^]

As indirect requests for identity confirmation, these utterances can be said to be instances of negative politeness within Brown and Levinson's typology. Nevertheless, although the procedure is indirect, the choice of address form serves to indicate whether the speaker is claiming closeness, in which case one would be talking about a positive-politeness strategy embedded within an indirect request, or distance and perhaps differences in status, which would be classified as instances of negative politeness.⁶ In the examples above, it is closeness, as in Ecuadorian Spanish first names are usually employed between people who have some degree of intimacy. In (3) below, on the other hand, distance and deference are expressed through the inclusion of a professional title:

- (3) 02 C: *aló doctora Valencia*[^]
hello Doctor Valencia

In other words, the realization of this move can have shades of negative and positive politeness at the same time.

A further level of embeddedness was found to occur when a diminutive suffix, for example, is attached to a deferential title as in (3), i.e., *doctorita*[^]'little woman doctor'[^]. The use of a diminutive is often associated with endearment (cf. Cruzado 1982) (i.e., positive politeness), so one could talk about a positive politeness strategy embedded within a negative politeness one, which in turn, is also embedded within a negative politeness procedure.

Embeddedness was also found in self-identifications which sometimes follow identity checks or greetings:

- (4) 02 C: ... le saluda *la señora de Porras*
 ... Mrs. Porras greets you

The indirect procedure employed here stands in marked contrast with what a Peninsular Spanish speaker, for example, would say – *Soy X* ('I'm X'). On the other hand, the speaker can choose to display distance and deference through lexical choices. In this particular example, the speaker's lexical choice – *saludar* ('to greet') rather than the unmarked form *hablar* ('to speak'), as in (5) – conveys deference: thus one can also talk about the display of negative politeness in this utterance.

- (5) 08 C: *Luchita buenos días está hablando con Mariana de Valencia*
 Luchita good morning you are speaking to Mariana de Valencia

With respect to closings, one of the initial closing moves in telephone interactions is what Schegloff and Sacks (1974) [1973] refer to as 'pre-closings', i.e., the use of utterances which allow for the initiation of the closing. One of these is the use of warrants, i.e., utterances such as *okay* and *well*, which allow for the possibility of starting the closing section if the other participant agrees.

What is interesting about pre-closings is that a number of the expressions used are, in fact, expressions of agreement, as in the following conversation:

- (6) 21 C: *ya Pato*
 okay Pato
 22: A: *bestial*
 it's beastly (great)

Through the use of agreement-seeking utterances, an explicit mention of the speaker's desire to finish the interaction is avoided, that is, the use of a negative politeness strategy can be identified here. On the other hand, given that these utterances are expressions of agreement, they can be regarded as instances of positive politeness, as the seeking of agreement is ultimately aimed at claiming common ground (i.e., one of Brown and Levinson's positive-politeness category).

A further level of embeddedness can also be identified in pre-closing utterances in relation to lexical choices. The agreement utterance employed in (6) (line 22), for instance, is one that conveys a great deal of intimacy. There are other utterances such as *está bien* ('it's fine'), as in (7), which can be regarded as conveying deference, whereas *ya* ('okay') can probably be categorized as a neutral expression:

- (7) 30 C: *sí ingeniero* está bien
yes Engineer it's fine
31 A: *ya*
okay
32 C: *está bien*
it's fine

Strategy embeddedness, however, does not appear to be restricted to openings and closings, but can also be found in other sections of conversations. It can be observed in conversation (8) below in what appears to be the introduction of the reason for the call:

- (8) 05 A: *cómo te va*
how are you doing
06 C: *ahí*
there
07 A: *qué haces*
what are you doing
08 C: *a ver si es posible caerte mañana*
to see if it's possible to drop by to see you tomorrow

Line 8 in this conversation is an indirect way of asking whether the person can come to see the other participant. Nevertheless, the choice of verb – *caer* ('to drop by') – as opposed to *venir a ver* ('come to see'), for example, is a claim of intimacy between the participants.

On the other hand, some of the lexical and even grammatical choices in conversation (9) below appear to signal deference – the use of *consultar* rather than *preguntar* ('to ask') and the selection of the formal subjunctive form *pudiésemos* rather than the unmarked conditional *podríamos* ('could'):

- (9) 18 C: *así que eh yo quisiera pues consultarle a usted ingeniero en qué momento pudiésemos reunirnos ...*
so uh I'd like to consult with you Engineer when we might be able to get together ...

To sum up, the analysis of utterances from different sections of telephone conversations in Ecuadorian Spanish displays that at least two levels of politeness can be identified to be operating in Ecuadorian Spanish – one that corresponds to the overall procedure employed to realize a particular act or move in an interaction (e.g., indirectness), and another that can be identified from actual lexical (and sometimes grammatical) choices. Furthermore, within lexical choices, as exemplified earlier, additional modifications were also found to be possible.

Phenomena of this type, however, were not found to be properly accounted for within Brown and Levinson's theory. They only briefly consider what they refer to as the use of 'hybrid' strategies:

The mixture of elements deriving from positive- and negative-politeness strategies in a given utterance may simply produce a kind of hybrid strategy somewhere in between the two. (1987: 230)

One of the problems with this notion is that if a large number of utterances display a combination of two strategies, the distinction Brown and Levinson propose between positive and negative politeness strategies loses its value. Furthermore, Brown and Levinson do not address lexical choices but cases where a second strategy is added or compounded (rather than embedded):

When token tag questions are tacked on to a presumptuous positively polite request, for example, or when hedges (e.g. *like*, *sort of*) are used to render more vague the expression of an extreme positive-politeness opinion, the results are basically still positive-politeness strategies, even though they make use of essentially negative-politeness techniques to soften the presumption. (1987: 230)

They also consider cases where there is a going 'back and forth between approaching and distancing' (i.e., between the use of positive and negative politeness strategies) to keep the right balance in the interaction (1987: 231). They say, for instance, that the speaker, '... upon making a positively polite request ... may decide that he has been too presumptuous and tack a long hedge onto it ...' (1987: 230). However, these cases, which also occur in ES, as in conversation (10) where a command is uttered and then it is softened by the inclusion of the agreement-seeking utterance *no*[^], again correspond to the occurrence of compound strategies rather than strategy embeddedness:

- (10) 115 A *salúdale a Daniel no*[^]
 greet Daniel no[^]
 (say hello to Daniel okay[^])

Hill et al. (1986) examined politeness phenomena in Japanese and American English and provided evidence of the existence of two factors, which, they claim are in operation in every sociolinguistic system of politeness. One of them is what they refer to as volition, i.e., the intentional use of strategies to achieve goals, as described by Brown and Levinson, and the other is discernment, which covers the selection of formal forms in relation to social conventions. They suggest that these factors can be more or less prominent in different languages. They found politeness in American English, for instance, to be centered around volition, whereas discernment was found to be more prominent in Japanese (also see Ide 1989).

It is proposed here that this distinction can also be adopted to account for the two levels of politeness described to be in operation in Ecuadorian Spanish. The overall procedures I discuss above would correspond to Brown

and Levinson's strategies, or volitional politeness, whereas lexical choices would fall within the category of discernment politeness where the selection of forms is made in relation to considerations such as social distance, the age, and status of the participants.

Ide, in fact, suggests that volition and discernment are 'points on a continuum' rather than unrelated categories and that '... each culture is different in the relative weight it assigns to them' (1989: 232–233). In this sense, Ecuadorian Spanish politeness could be said to be placed half-way between the two axes, as it displays the use of both with neither one being particularly prominent. In relation to strategies or volitional aspects, the use of indirectness, for example, appears to be important in Ecuadorian Spanish, say, as compared to Peninsular Spanish, but not as crucial as it might be in British English. With respect to lexical choices, the expression of deference also appears to be more important in Ecuadorian Spanish as compared to Peninsular Spanish or British English, for example. On the other hand, as compared with Japanese, social conventions in Ecuadorian Spanish do not appear to be as rigid or obligatory.

This distinction can thus account for the use of indirectness to carry out different moves in telephone interactions in Ecuadorian Spanish, as well as for participants' selection of lexical forms in relation to considerations of distance and intimacy, which, in turn, are tied to considerations of age and status. This distinction, however, as it will be demonstrated further on, is not completely unproblematic.

Participants' motivations underlying lexical choices

Another issue that emerged, which is closely linked to the previous one, has to do with the motivations underlying participants' use of strategies and lexical (and sometimes grammatical) choices. Brown and Levinson propose that people are endowed with 'rational means–ends reasoning' (1987: 7), which guides their choice of linguistic strategy in relation to particular goals, and that one aspect of rational behaviour '... seems to be the ability to weigh up different means to an end, and choose the one that most satisfies the desired goals' (1987: 65). So, within their framework of analysis, the use of deferential forms (i.e., lexical choices generally), together with the use of indirectness and other strategies, is regarded as intentional strategic action.

What the Ecuadorian Spanish data show, as has already been noted in relation to Japanese politeness (Hill et al 1986; Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1989), is that a large number of lexical choices appear to be made in relation to considerations of social conventions rather than stemming from rational considerations of ends and means to ends, upon which Brown and Levinson's

theory rests. In the data examined, daughters and sons, for instance, address their parents with the polite form of 'you' (i.e., *usted*) in order to show the respect parents in that particular generation are due, rather than to pursue the attainment of a goal in the interaction. In the same way, diminutives are attached to older people's names to express consideration, and people who are only slightly acquainted address each other with a title (e.g., *señor* 'Mr'; *señora* 'Mrs'). In other words, the data examined shows that strategies and lexical choices do not necessarily have the same motivations and that, as such, it can be a mistake to classify both under the same category. In this sense, Hill et al. and Ide's distinction between volitional and discernment politeness, also appears to be relevant.

Underlying the issue of lexical choices reflecting people's adherence to social conventions in Ecuadorian Spanish is the problematic notion of face. As has been claimed for Japanese and other non-Western languages (see above), it is not for their self-image that Ecuadorian Spanish speakers appear to be deferential, as Brown and Levinson might want to claim, that is, it is not due to their desire to protect their individuality or territory (or the other participant's), but possibly to conform to the social norms of the group, which assign a certain status and thus dictate respect to the elderly, parents, and so forth. In other words, there seems to be group rather than individual orientation operating in Ecuadorian society (or at least in many social groups within it), so it might be more accurate to say that there is a public social (rather than self-) image (cf. Mao 1994) which people aspire to hold for themselves:

This kind of orientation is encapsulated in the everyday notion of *el que dirán* ('what people will say'). It means that in carrying out your everyday life it is important to consider what people will say or think of you. It is important to keep appearances (i.e., *guardar las apariencias*), so that everyone holds 'a good image' of you. In other words, you are expected to conform to the group's expectations and put the group's wishes before your own (at least in appearance), which does not leave you with much room for individuality.

As such, the notion of negative face (and wishes) as proposed by Brown and Levinson also appears to fail to capture Ecuadorian Spanish speakers' motivations behind their selection of certain negative politeness strategies – it is individuality that Brown and Levinson stress, whereas in Ecuadorian Spanish, conformity to the group seems to be the driving force.

Nevertheless, the Ecuadorian Spanish data do not only display the use of lexical forms in relation to social conventions, but it also display 'strategic' uses of these forms – purposeful selection of pronouns of address in certain contexts (e.g., *usted* over *tú* at the onset of a love relationship or condescending *vos* over *tú* in a dispute); the manipulative use of diminutives to express affection or a closeness which is non-existent, and which Toscano (1953:

424) refers to as the use of diminutives with 'mercantile affection', and the manipulative use of titles in service encounters or business interactions to gain people's goodwill.

Such strategic uses of address forms can be observed in everyday interaction. The term commonly employed to address plumbers, carpenters and other male manual workers, for instance, is that of *maestro* 'master', although many of these workers have not undergone formal education or training, and female stallholders are *caseras* or better *caseritas*. *Licenciado* 'a (i.e., someone with a) B.A.' is another term which is often employed to address people in service-encounter type of interactions whether they have a university degree or not. The idea is to flatter people and make them feel important. This might, in fact, be a requisite to get them to do things for you, or at least, to get what you want faster. On the other hand, if you know the person by name, diminutives are often employed also to get people's goodwill. So, when you address a secretary or clerk and you make a request, you will say, '*Luchito, necesito ...*' ('Little Lucho, I need ...'), whereas in other circumstances, Lucho, nickname for Luis, will do.

These strategic uses of lexical forms do not seem to have a place within Hill et al's and Ide's distinction. One can argue, however, that there is an element of discernment in them as their use can be said to constitute an attempt to recreate real social conventions. For instance, when a title is used strategically, it is the status associated with that title in real life which is invoked.

What could be said to be behind the strategic uses under discussion and possibly other uses, is, however, the notion of reciprocity, considered within social psychology (cf. Brown 1986). This notion comes from exchange theory, which originally stemmed from economics. Within this theory it is taken as established that '... in all societies at all times it is and has been considered right (normative) that people should benefit those who benefit them' (Brown 1986: 47). In other words, the idea is that if people are given benefits, they will tend to reciprocate them as there is a 'norm of reciprocity' operating in social interaction.

Applying this notion to the data under examination, one could say that when deferential forms are used strategically, the acknowledgment or granting of status to the hearer, might make him/her feel compelled to reciprocate and, therefore, do what he/she is being asked to do. In fact, some of the deferential forms employed in Ecuadorian Spanish can be said to have a coercive element, too. In the market, as a customer, you might be addressed as *patrón*, or *patrona*, through which the speaker puts himself/herself in a lower position (as a servant) and yourself in a higher one (as the master). Nevertheless, such positioning invokes not only rights, but also a set of obligations *patrones* will have towards servants, since as Leach (1982: 151) says, many social roles (e.g., teacher, doctor, master) only have a value in relation

to their dyadic counterparts (e.g., pupil, patient, servant). As a master, you can feel important and powerful, but you are also expected to help out, or to buy things in a sales context.

Likewise, when diminutives are used strategically, the expression of affection and closeness diminutives are associated with, will also prompt the other person to comply with a given request more readily.

Variation in the politeness value of utterances

A further complication encountered in the present study was to find that a number of forms can convey different types of politeness in different contexts. For instance, the attachment of a diminutive to a first name (e.g., *Anita* for Ana) can convey affection and camaraderie (i.e., positive politeness) among younger participants⁷ who are in a friendship relationship; on the other hand, when first names + diminutive are employed to address older participants, as suggested above, there is also an element of consideration and respect (to older age perhaps) (with shades of negative politeness?). If diminutives are attached to terms of address within a business type of interaction, a manipulative element comes into play, as suggested earlier.

On the other hand, in requests to the other participant to hold the line, the use of diminutives can be equated with minimization strategies (i.e., minimizing the imposition) as in *un momentito por favor* meaning just a moment please. Likewise, when uttering a different kind of request to someone who is not an intimate, the request is usually presented as very small – *un favorcito* ('a little favor'), as opposed to *un favorsote* ('a big favor') to a close friend or relative. Then, going beyond telephone talk, diminutives in offers, for example, appear to have an element of self-humbling, on the one hand (i.e., 'It's only a little tiny thing that I humbly offer you'), as in *¿Le sirvo una colita?* ('Shall I get you a little soft drink?') or *¿Quiere un cafecito?* ('Do you want a little coffee?'), but also one of persuasion/manipulation, i.e., 'It's only a little coffee so you can't say no.'

With respect to strategies, the use of indirectness, which is usually associated with distancing from and avoiding an imposition (cf. Leech 1983), was not always found to be so in the data examined. The use of indirect forms in some cases appears to achieve more intimacy and camaraderie than the use of more direct ones. In family greetings at the end of the conversation, for example, you might hear *Salude a X* 'Say hello to X', which is the unmarked form for this type of move. However, if you employ the future tense, as in *Saludarásle a X* ('You will say hello to X'), you are in fact achieving more intimacy despite the distancing-in-time effect of the future. This can be contrasted with requests to speak to the intended answerer, such as *¿Estará*

Anita? ('Will Anita be there?') (Placencia 1992), where the indirectness of the utterance makes its force more tentative.

In short, there are a number of strategies whose value as a positive or a negative politeness strategy needs to be determined from the context of their occurrence. This means that it can be difficult or misleading to make generalizations concerning the prevalence of a certain politeness strategy based on form only, as there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between strategy and politeness value.

The need to examine politeness in context rather than in isolation has already been suggested by Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1989), for example. Their emphasis, however, appears to be on the use of formal forms in relation to the status and age of participants, whereas the Ecuadorian Spanish data examined suggests that both lexical choices and the use of strategies need to be examined in relation to context.

Features of politeness at the macro speech act level

Considerations of politeness as exemplified by Brown and Levinson are generally at the utterance level. Looking at the macro speech act or global level (van Dijk 1977, 1980) of an interaction, however, i.e., at a sequence of actions that make up a global act, can give another dimension on politeness matters. Mao (1994), for example, has shown that invitations in Chinese are quite intricate and that they are only achieved through a sequence of actions rather than by one individual speech act.

The examination of telephone conversations in Ecuadorian Spanish at this level has made evident some of the paths people follow to initiate a telephone interaction, to arrive at the reason for the call, and to come out of the interaction. And in the same way that it has made evident the moves that are carried out at different stages of the interaction, it has also displayed the moves that are skipped in some contexts and the significance of their absence. This is the first point I consider below in relation to politeness matters. The second point I examine is that of directness and indirectness at the macro speech act level (e.g., carrying out fewer or more moves to arrive at the reason for the call or to leave the interaction) and what this means in terms of politeness for an Ecuadorian Spanish speaker.

Politeness through omission

In their analysis of address terms, Wolfson and Manes (1980) consider cases where address forms are omitted, resulting in *zero* address; they rightly sug-

gest that these omissions say something about the relationship between the participants, often that they are very close or very distant. In the same manner, the omission or inclusion of certain moves in the opening and closing sections of conversations and presumably in other types of social interaction, can constitute a claim of distance or intimacy (i.e., exemplifying the use of negative or positive politeness strategies). For example, in conversation (4) above, the self-identification itself signals that there is some distance between the participants, whereas its absence in conversation (11) can be regarded as a claim of intimacy:

- (11) 01 A *Aló.*
 [telephone greeting]
 02 C *Hola qué tal?*
 Hello how are you?

In other words, in addition to the linguistic level of realization of a speech act or move (e.g., how people identify themselves), there is an underlying level at which politeness phenomena need to be examined (e.g., whether people identify themselves at all or not). For this purpose, it is obviously necessary to look at the overall structure of different types of telephone conversations or other types of interaction in a given language and culture.

Indirectness at the macro speech act level

One of the key concepts within Brown and Levinson's notion of negative politeness strategies is that of indirectness. Indirectness can be defined as the detour participants take to say what they mean – the longer the detour, the more indirect the utterance is.

This concept has generally been applied to individual utterances rather than sequences of utterances. What is proposed here is that it can be extended to account for behavior at the macro speech act level – to characterize the detour participants take to achieve their goal in a particular interaction (e.g., to enter a conversation and to utter the reason for the calling in the case of telephone conversations). This can provide a different perspective on the rules governing social interaction in a given language and culture, and also of what polite behavior is.

The examination of different telephone conversations in Ecuadorian Spanish (Placencia 1991) showed that participants followed a certain course of action which included a series of moves leading up to the utterance of the reason for the call, and afterwards, leading up to the termination of the conversation.⁸ Among participants in a kinship or friendship relationship, the first sequence of moves included checking the other participant's identity,

exchanging greetings, expressing pleasure about the interaction, making inquiries about each other's well-being, and restating them, and asking about each other's family (see conversation [12] below). Likewise, closings included a number of moves that mirrored opening moves. In the case of 'instrumental' calls, i.e., calls where the reason for the call could be summarized in concrete terms, such as 'X called for X, Y and Z', the reason for the call was often stated after the exchanges just described, and often restated in the closing section, too.

- (12) 01 A *aló*
[telephone greeting]
- 02 C *aló^ Marianita^*
[telephone greeting]^ Marianita^
- 03 A *sí María Cecilia^*
yes Maria Cecilia^
- 04 C *muy buenos días* [greeting]
very good morning
- 05 A *sí mucho gusto cómo le va* [expression of appreciation +
how-are-you inquiry]
yes much pleasure how are things going for you
- 06 C *cómo ha pasado* [how-are-you inquiry]
how have you been
- 07 A *bien y usted cómo están todos en su casa* [family inquiry]
fine and you how is everyone at home
- 08 C *bien sin novedad Marianita*
fine without any news Marianita
- 09 A *Marcelito^ (.) Isabelita^* [family inquiry]
- 10 C *bien bien mire Marianita llamo por encargo de mi mami^*
fine fine look Marianita I'm calling at my mum's request

On the other hand, the analysis of similar conversations in British English showed that the reason for the call was arrived at faster, in that British English callers tended to identify themselves more often than Ecuadorian Spanish speakers at the start of the conversation, for example, and thus some time and effort was saved, that enquiries about the other participant's well-being and family did not occur in some cases or at least were not as numerous, and that fewer moves leading up to the termination of the conversation were carried out. In other words, what was found was that the detour people take to utter the reason for the call or to come out of a conversations appeared to be generally longer in Ecuadorian Spanish as compared to British English.⁹

In this respect, the problem for an Ecuadorian Spanish speaker dealing with a British one might be that no matter how considerate the British

English speaker is at the utterance level (through the use of indirectness, for example), the speed with which conversations proceed through the occurrence of fewer opening and closing moves can leave the Ecuadorian Spanish speaker 'holding the receiver' when the other person has hung up, feeling not properly attended to, as has been my personal experience. This phenomenon, however, does not appear to be circumscribed to telephone conversations only; it can be observed in everyday face-to-face interactions, and also in other types of interactions, such as the medical consultation, where again, the speed of the interaction in the British context, as opposed to the Ecuadorian one, can leave the patient with a similar feeling, that of not having had the opportunity to say all he/she had wanted to say.

As such, it can be argued that politeness is not only about how you say things, as Brown and Levinson appear to stress, but also about the sum of things you say (also see Mao 1994), or what you say or do not say in a particular social interaction. This is a matter, which, as suggested earlier, has not been dealt with by Brown and Levinson.

In the case of openings and closings of telephone conversations, this matter is closely linked with ritualistic behavior (i.e., in the form of greetings and inquiries about the other person's well-being, family greetings and the like, rather than telephone-management utterances), which also seems to be outside Brown and Levinson's scope of study given the emphasis they put on face-threatening acts and conscious strategies employed to deal with them. Of course, there can also be an instrumental element in such exchanges (e.g., 'I'll listen to your health problems so you will listen to mine afterwards'), but this does not seem to be properly accounted for in Brown and Levinson's framework either.

Summary and discussion

In this paper I have described and exemplified some of the difficulties (both operational and conceptual) encountered in the application of Brown and Levinson's theory of face to authentic data in Ecuadorian Spanish, some of which echo criticism which has already been made to the framework they propose.

The first problem I considered was that of strategy embeddedness, that is, finding that at different stages of telephone interactions, the realization of certain moves included the use of a negative politeness strategy with a positive or a negative politeness one embedded in it. The embedded form usually corresponded to lexical choices which appeared to be made in relation to social conventions in some cases and strategically in others. This finding was used to bring into question Brown and Levinson's general treatment of posi-

tive and negative politeness strategies as clear-cut categories, and therefore, their distinction between the two types of strategies.

The second difficulty considered had to do with participants' motivations behind their choice of strategy. The motivations Brown and Levinson attribute to the use of certain negative politeness strategies did not always seem to match those Ecuadorian Spanish speakers appeared to exhibit. That is, the Ecuadorian Spanish data examined seemed to corroborate previous criticism of Brown and Levinson's notion of negative face as representing Western individuality and not group orientation, which still appears to be predominant in Ecuadorian society (or at least in some groups within it). This was supported by observations relating to everyday language expressions which capture the importance of the group rather than the individual's concerns.

The third difficulty considered was the fact that there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between a strategy and its value, thus, indirectness does not always imply distance, nor does the use of the formal form of 'you' (i.e., *usted*). Therefore, it can be difficult to make generalizations based on considerations of the linguistic realization of an utterance alone. It was suggested that the value of a strategy can be determined by considering the type of move the utterance is used to realize (e.g., the use of the future in requests to speak to the intended answerer conveys tentativeness, but has a different value in requests to the other participant to greet friends or relatives) and participants' age and the type of relationship they are in, as well as the degree of distance obtaining between them, among other features.

Finally, some features of politeness at the macro speech act level were considered; these were presented as omissions within Brown and Levinson's framework rather than difficulties. They included the need to examine the sequences of acts that make up a global act (van Dijk 1977, 1980) and the implication in politeness terms of the inclusion or omission of certain moves in a sequence, as well as the need to look at the politeness dimension that comes from examining the detour participants take to reach the reason for the call and to come out of an interaction, in addition to considerations of indirectness at the utterance level. It was observed that this detour often appears to be longer in Ecuadorian Spanish, as compared to British English, for example, and it was suggested that this dimension can be regarded as another important element of Ecuadorian Spanish politeness – a faster arrival at the reason for the call and exit from the conversation might be regarded as more efficient in the British English context, for example, but as impolite in the Ecuadorian Spanish one.

Concerning a characterization of Ecuadorian Spanish politeness, I have shown here and elsewhere (Placencia 1992) the importance of the expression of deference as a feature of politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish, on the one

hand, and the marking of intimacy and camaraderie, on the other, whose use is linked to different types of interactions and different features of context. I have also shown that indirect forms appeared to be preferred for the realization of a number of requests, both telephone-specific and others, but that there is some room for more direct utterances, too.

In another paper (Placencia 1995), I also described a feature that appears to interact with indirectness – the use of explicit or elliptical forms to realize different moves. I found that in interactions where participants are not aware of each other's identity, elliptical or abbreviated forms (often with the appearance of command forms) tended to be used as the premium appeared to be on efficiency (i.e., saving time and effort) and the expression of deference; on the other hand, interactions where participants know each other displayed the use of more explicit forms, where the use of indirect procedures became clear. It was suggested that in this type of interactions the premium was on the expression of consideration rather than efficiency; utterances tended, therefore, not to be abbreviated.

For a fuller characterization of the politeness strategies employed in Ecuadorian Spanish, however, a wider range of interactions would need to be examined. What is clear, in any case, is that Brown and Levinson's theory does not seem to provide a framework that can adequately characterize Ecuadorian Spanish politeness.

Now, concerning explanations for participants' selection of different politeness strategies in Ecuadorian Spanish, I attempted to show here that the notion of face, as proposed by Brown and Levinson, presents some difficulties, since it fails to capture the group orientation that appears to prevail in Ecuadorian society. I suggested that the notion of discernment as proposed by Hill et al. (1986) and Ide (1989) can better account for participants' selection of deferential forms in relation to social conventions; this notion, nevertheless, left the problem of strategic uses of these forms unresolved. I suggested that, to understand the latter, it could be useful to look at some of the notions proposed within social psychology, such as the norm of reciprocity which emphasizes the reciprocal benefits people can get or expect from a given act, rather than the individual's concerns and benefits alone.¹⁰

Apart from considerations of basic notions of social behavior with a possible universal character, I also suggest that a better understanding of politeness in Ecuadorian Spanish can be achieved by looking at historical developments, social institutions and Ecuadorian Spanish speakers' cultural heritage. The prevalence of the expression of deference, for example, can be better understood by considering the rigid class system which Spanish Conquistadors brought with them to Ecuador and the rest of Hispanic America in the sixteenth century. It represented a medieval conception of society, with a marked hierarchical and patriarchal structure, which extended

into the family and other institutions. Different systems of domination and exploitation were also implemented by the Conquistadors first, and the Criollos next (e.g., the *mitas* and *obrajes*; the *latifundio*), perpetuating throughout the centuries patterns of inequality and hierarchical relations (i.e., master–servant; patron–client); these have survived in many places in the figure of the *terrateniente* (the big landowner) as the master, for example.

Ecuadorian society has undergone and is still undergoing many changes as a result of different political and economic developments that have taken place this century, in particular. However, although some of the determinants of class membership have changed, as values have changed, the system of hierarchy, with the inequalities it represents, and the master–servant mentality seems to have prevailed, at least to some degree. As Cubitt (1988: 110) says when she describes Latin American society, ‘where modern values have been incorporated they have often not reduced inequality’. On the contrary, as she goes on to say, ‘new values ... have the effect of reinforcing traditional differences’ because only the elite have direct access to some of these values (1988: 111).

Strategic uses of deferential forms or intimacy claimers and other aspects of linguistic politeness behavior can probably be better understood also in relation to considerations of the family as an institution, and the type of relationships large families in the Ecuadorian (and Latin American) context give rise to. Cubitt (1988: 101), regards, for example, ‘personalism’, i.e., the building of social and business life around personal relationships, and the manipulation of the latter, as a feature stemming from the structure of the Latin American family. Personalism can be seen, for example, in the use of certain politeness formulas, such as *si fuera tan amable* (‘if you were so kind’) (Placencia 1992), which constitute appeals to the other person’s feelings.

Cubitt describes the notion of *compadrazgo*, too – a type of relationship between the parents of a child and the child’s godparents, which creates a ‘binding’ and ‘permanent’ relationship between them, and, which, as Cubitt also says, ‘... offers extensive manipulative opportunities’ (1988: 99); this is so in that the *compadrazgo* relationship requires ‘obligation to help at all times’ (1988: 98), among other things.

From these two examples, it is possible to see that the examination of different types of relationships within the family, which appear to extend into the circle of friends, too, and the rights and obligations attached to them, can provide insight into the way people carry out their social interaction at other levels, too.

An interesting area of study related to this topic would be the examination of requests for favors or invitations. You sometimes hear foreigners complaining about not being able to understand why an Ecuadorian says he/she

would do something (e.g., come to an invitation), and then does not do it. This is behavior Ecuadorians sometimes seem to adopt because, on the one hand, they do not want to do X, but, on the other, they feel it is not right to say 'No', at least directly, as they would be failing to live up to the other person's expectations (i.e., not fulfilling their duty towards the other person). Failing to turn up appears to be less damaging for their image than issuing a direct refusal.

As such, Brown and Levinson's claim that one of people's basic needs is to be free from imposition, might be accurate, but it might also be in conflict with the norms of the society (i.e., Ecuadorian society in this case) where the group's needs have precedence over the individual's needs. In this respect, it is possible to talk about the predominance of group orientation in Ecuadorian Spanish or what Mao (1994: 484) refers to as the emulation of the ideal social identity (i.e., expected behavior), as opposed to the pursuit of the 'ideal individual autonomy', which might be prevalent in other societies.

Finally, the notion of '*el que dirán*' and the related notion of '*guardar las apariencias*', presented here as group-orientation markers, are part of Ecuadorian Spanish speakers' cultural heritage – a part of the Spanish legacy that came with the thinking of the time, and that has since evolved, but not disappeared. The origin of these notions can, in fact, be traced back to the time of the Conquest. They are documented in the Spanish literature of the XVI century and beyond. The squire, one of the characters in the classic work *Lazarillo de Tormes* (sixteenth century), for example, dazzles his servant with his need to 'keep appearances' (of wealth in this case) and well-being despite the fact he hardly had any belongings or anything to eat. These notions are linked to the theme of 'honor' developed in the theatre of Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca (seventeenth century). It is variations or adaptations of this concept that appear to be in operation behind some linguistic and non-linguistic behavior in Ecuadorian society.

Of course, there are also elements from our indigenous legacy (e.g., from the Quechua language and culture) that have also been incorporated in Ecuadorian Spanish and which would need careful consideration, too.

Birkbeck College, London

Appendix: Transcription conventions

Numbers: Each numbered line represents a turn in the interaction. The number on the left corresponds to the actual number of the turn in the conversation from which the utterance was extracted.

Transcription of text: An orthographic transcription is given, but the traditional punctuation symbols are avoided (cf. Schegloff and Sacks 1974 [1973])

Text: The Spanish text is given in italics and a literal translation of the Spanish text is given in normal font.

Text in parentheses: A communicative translation is given when the literal translation is obscure.

Letters: C stands for the caller, i.e., the person who makes a call. A stands for the answerer, i.e., the person who answers the phone.

^ marks rising intonation. (Falling intonation is regarded here as the unmarked form and thus no symbol is employed to mark it.)

Notes

1. The same corpus of data referred to in Placencia (1992) (i.e., 73 telephone conversations recorded in the conversation analytic tradition in Quito, Ecuador) was employed for this analysis. The present study focuses on non-mediated telephone conversations, however, whereas the previous one looked at mediated telephone conversations.
2. This category of conversations, as well as the other one proposed (i.e., non-mediated), was arrived at by examining participants' discourse role in telephone interactions, that is, the role they play in relation to the message rather than other participants (cf. Thomas 1986).
3. I use the term 'move', which I have borrowed from Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) to refer to the smallest units within telephone conversations, such as confirming the other participant's identity, greeting him/her, inquiring about his/her well-being, and so forth, all of which can be regarded as steps participants take towards a goal (e.g., towards the statement of the reason for the call). Moves are underlying procedures which can have different surface linguistic realizations. They are different from speech acts in that they emphasize the goal-orientedness of conversation.
4. See Appendix for transcription conventions.
5. A literal translation is given here and throughout, rather than a communicative one, so that the reader can see the linguistic mechanisms employed by Ecuadorian Spanish speakers. Occasionally, a communicative translation is also given when the literal translation is obscure.
6. As Brown and Levinson (1987: 130) say, negative-politeness realizations such as the use of conventional indirectness, hedges, and the expression of deference are forms '... useful in general for social "distancing" (just as positive-politeness realizations are forms for minimizing social distance)'.
7. The younger generation group in the study on which this article is based corresponds to participants between 25 and 40 years of age. The older group of participants includes two generation groups – those between 41 and 60, and those between 61 and 80.
8. It was possible to determine alternative courses of action in conversations where an instrumental goal was predominant (e.g., a call to make a request, to invite, etc.), as opposed to those whose main function was phatic (i.e., a call to have a chat). In the former category, a building-up structure (i.e., building up to the reason for the call) was easily identifiable. Of course, certain instrumental calls have a strong phatic element (e.g., in the

- invitation itself, for example), but still differ in structure from those where people just want to chat.
9. Features of context, however, might determine the occurrence or absence of some moves, too. For example, if you speak to someone on the phone daily or if you see that person often, identity-checks or in-depth 'how-are-you' enquiries become irrelevant. Still, given similar circumstances, more of such inquiries (personal and familial) appear to take place in Ecuadorian Spanish. This could be understandable considering that the (extended) family plays a more central role in people's lives in Ecuadorian society. People often live with some members of their family or are in frequent contact with them.
 10. Within social anthropology, the notion of reciprocity is discussed by some scholars as being ingrained in the nature of relationships. Leach (1982: 150), for example, suggests that 'all person-to-person relationships entail reciprocity', and that 'individual A, by virtue of his position in society, has rights and duties vis-a-vis individual B', and vice versa. He also talks about relationships existing as 'feelings of indebtedness' (i.e., of rights and obligations), and there being a 'moral obligation' between individuals in a relationship 'to balance things out over a period of time' (i.e., to exchange some kind of gift) (1982: 154).

References

- Brown, Penelope and Stephen Levinson
 1978 Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In Goody, Esther (ed.), *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 56–289.
 1987 *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, Roger
 1986 *Social Psychology*. New York: Free Press.
- Cruzado, Anna
 1982 Diminutive, augmentative, and pejorative suffixes in English and Spanish. In Nash, R. and D. Belaval (eds.), *Readings in Spanish-English Contrastive Linguistics, Vol. 3*. San Juan: Inter American Press, 66–92.
- Cubitt, Tessa
 1988 *Latin American Society*. Essex: Longman Scientific and Technical.
- Dijk, Teun A. van
 1977 *Text and Context*. London: Longman.
 1980 *Macrostructures*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Godard, Danièle
 1977 Same settings, different norms: Phone call beginnings in France and the United States. *Language in Society* 6(3), 209–219.
- Gu, Yeguo
 1990 Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14, 237–257.
- Hill, Beverly, Sachiko Ide, Shoko Ikuta, Akiko Kawasaki, and Tsunao Ogino
 1986 Universals of linguistic politeness. Quantitative evidence from Japanese and American English. *Journal of Pragmatics* 10, 347–371.
- Ide, Sachiko
 1989 Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua* 8, 223–248.
- Leach, Edmund
 1982 *Social Anthropology*. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks.

- Leech, Geoffrey N.
 1983 *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Mao, L. R.
 1994 Beyond politeness theory: 'Face' revisited and renewed. *Journal of Pragmatics* 21, 451–486.
- Matsumoto, Yoshiko
 1989 Politeness and conversational universals – observations from Japanese. *Multilingua* 8, 207–221.
- Nwoye, Onuigbo G.
 1992 Linguistic politeness and socio-cultural variation of the notion of face. *Journal of Pragmatics* 18, 309–328.
- Placencia, María E.
 1991 Telephone conversations revisited: A cross-cultural study of conversational mechanisms employed over the telephone in Ecuadorian Spanish and British English. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. University of Lancaster.
 1992 Politeness in mediated telephone conversations in Ecuadorian Spanish and British English. *Language Learning Journal* 6, 80–2.
 1995 Explicitness and ellipsis as features of conversational style in British English and Ecuadorian Spanish. *IRAL XXXIII/2*, 129–141.
- Rico, F. (ed.)
 1987 *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Schegloff, Emmanuel
 1979 Identification and recognition in telephone conversation openings. In Psathas, G. (ed.), *Everyday Language: Studies in Ethnomethodology*. New York: Irvington Publishers, 23–78.
- Schegloff, Emmanuel and Harvey Sacks
 1974[1973] Opening up closings. In Turner, R. (ed.), *Ethnomethodology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Education, 233–264.
- Sifianou, Maria
 1989 On the telephone again! Differences in telephone behaviour: England versus Greece. *Language in Society* 18, 527–544.
 1991 Off-record indirectness and the notion of imposition. *Multilingua* 12, 69–79.
- Sinclair, John and Malcolm Coulthard
 1975 *Towards an Analysis of Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, Jenny A.
 1986 The dynamics of discourse: A pragmatic analysis of confrontational interaction. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. University of Lancaster.
- Toscano, Humberto
 1953 *El español en el Ecuador*. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Patronato Menéndez y Pelayo, Instituto Miguel de Cervantes.
- Wolfson, Nessa and Joan Manes
 1980 Don't 'dear' me! In McConnel-Ginet, S., R. Borker and N. Furnam (eds.), *Women and Language in Literature and Society*. New York: Praeger, 72–92.