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## 10. The Study of Politeness Principle in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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### Abstract

Politeness is the seminal aspect in human communication. Various linguist have derived several maxims and strategies of politeness in their theories. Gefery Leech (1983) developed his politeness theory on the basis of his predecessors' framework and propounded six maxims to be employed in the communication to induce more politeness in the interaction. This paper illustrates these six maxims viz- Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy maxim found at various discourses in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004).

**Key words:** maxims, politeness, strategy, social face, *The Hungry Tide*,

### Introduction

Being polite in behaviour and conversation invites cordiality from the listener and the society whereas being impolite during conversation exerts a negative impact on the speaker's personality. In our day to day talks, speech, gossips, meetings and gatherings, we often encounter with a variety of speakers, some are polite, some are impolite, some are over polite than another, etc. The question may arise in the mind is why politeness is significant in conversations. The answer is quiet simple as everybody wants to maintain one's relationship, reputation, and of course one's social face. In our social life, we do not want to appear as an impolite person while talking with others, we consciously follow some rules. These rules are studied under the theory of politeness. Politeness Principal is that part of a larger domain of pragmatics. It is interconnected with the theory of cooperative principles and Speech acts theory. Lackoff and Brown's theory and Levinson's model of Politeness Principal and Leech's model are all the most prominent politeness theories. The present research article applies these politeness strategies to analyse Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). For the purpose of the study, the article



is divided into two parts vis. the theoretical aspects. The later includes politeness principles, such as: maxims, the concept of Face, FSA, FTA, positive and negative politeness strategies. The second part of the article deals with the application of the theory of politeness principles to the selective dialogues and conversations and discourses from the novel *The Hungry Tide*.

### Leech's Theory of Politeness Principle

The politeness principle is one of the most debated subjects in Pragmatics. There are many different theories presented regarding politeness principles during the last two decades. Leech's (1983) 'Politeness Principle Theory', Brown and Levinson's (1987) 'Face Theory', Scollon and Scollon (2001) 'Politeness Systems Theory' are few to mention. In this research paper, Leech's (1983) 'Politeness Principle Theory' has been contemplated and applied to the sample discourses from Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide*.

Various definitions of politeness have been propounded by different scholars. Lakoff (1990:34) and Leech (1983: p. 82) define politeness as "the forms of behaviour which facilities personal and social interaction to obtain an atmosphere of harmony between interlocutors via minimizing the inner inherent conflict in all human interactions" Similarly Brown and Levinson (1987: p. 61) defined politeness as "forms of behaviour used to maintain and develop communication between potentially aggressive partners". They maintained that positive and negative strategies are employed to minimize threat and to accomplish linguistic politeness. The free encyclopaedia Wikipedia (2007: p.1) defined politeness as manipulating the good behaviour or etiquette, whose goal is to make the interactant feel comfortable and relaxed. Though these definitions are apparently different, they all suggest that politeness is the form of behaviour that is employed to avoid skirmish, conflict and aggression.

Leech proposed his Politeness Principle (PP) in 1983. He presented his theory as a way or procedure to explain how politeness works in social interactions. He propounded the following six maxims of politeness: Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Approbation maxim, Modesty maxim, Agreement maxim, and Sympathy maxim.

1. **Tact Maxim** states: "Minimizing the expression of beliefs which imply cost to other; maximizing the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to other."

For example:

- a. Could I stop you for a minute?
- b. If I could just explain this then.



2. **Generosity Maxim** states: "Minimizing the expression of beliefs that express or imply benefit to self; maximizing the expression of beliefs that express or imply cost to self." The maxim of generosity focuses on the speaker, and says that others should be put first instead of the self. For example:
  - a. You just sit and let me complete the cleaning.
  - b. You must join us for dinner today.
3. **Approbation Maxim** states: "Minimizing the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of other; maximizing the expression of beliefs which express approval of other." It means to praise others. The first part of the maxim suggests to side step disagreement; the second part proposes to make other people feel good by showing solidarity. (Leech, 1983: 132)
  - a. I saw you sing dancing at the party last night. It seemed that you were enjoying yourself!
  - b. Satish, I know you're a genius. Would you answer this math problem here?
4. **Modesty Maxim** states: "Minimizing the expression of praise of self; maximizing the expression of dispraise of self."

For example:

- a. Oh, I'm so dumb – I didn't notice the man, did I?
5. **Agreement Maxim** states "Minimizing the expression of disagreement between self and other; maximizing the expression of agreement between self and other." Actually, it cannot be followed claimed that people totally avoid disagreement. It is simply observed that they are much more direct in expressing agreement, rather than disagreement. For example:
    - A. *Yes, Rahul, I thought we sort out this already during our meet.*
  6. **Sympathy Maxim** states: "minimizing antipathy between self and other; maximizing sympathy between the self and other." This includes a small group of speech acts such as congratulation, sympathy, and expressing condolences

For example:

- a. *I am sorry to hear about your father.*

Beside this, indirectness has a relation with politeness. The more the addresser is indirect in ordering, commanding, requesting, advising, etc., the more polite he/she is.



For example

- a. Shut your mouth.
- b. Would you please keep quite?
- c. Carry the cases.
- d. Could you possibly carry the cases?

Here (a) and (c) are both the examples of direct speech act since the addressee has no alternatives but to perform the action. Such examples, maximize the cost to the face of the addressee; consequently, they are called impolite. On the other hand, (b) and (d) are indirect impositions because the addressee has a free will to say no. Thus, these examples minimise the cost to the addressee by the use of options. Appropriately, they are polite propositions.

### **Politeness Principle in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide***

The rich culture of India has been painted in the works of Amitav Ghosh and also has the fragrance of Indianness. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) comprises ample examples to illustrate various pragmatic principles. The novel is set in the Bay of Bengal, especially the area of Sundarbans. It tells the story of Piya Roy. She arrives in Sunderban with the purpose of research study on dolphins. She belongs to an Indian parentage but lives in America. The next character Kanai Datta is a Delhi based businessman, who came there by profession to visit his widowed aunt and who wanted to read some writings left by her husband. Her husband was a political radical and meet with a mysterious death. Kanai was confronted with Piya in the train. In due course he worked as a translator for Piya. Fokir was another important character who helped Piya in every critical situation. Piya Roy's journey began with a mischance, when she was slipped into crocodile-infested waters. However, she was saved by a young, uneducated fisherman, Fokir. They did not understand language but Piya and Fokir were strongly drawn to each other, sharing a strange feeling towards each. Piya hired Fokir to aid her research and found a translator in Kanai Dutt, a businessman from Delhi whose principled aunt and uncle were long-time settlers in the Sundarbans. .

There are multiple examples in the novel where the characters observe the politeness principles. The main characters Piya, Kanai and Fokir during their conversations at various situations seem to be conscious about the politeness.

### **Tact Maxim**

When Kanai was travelling on the train, he saw a man sitting right beside him near the window. Kanai had a newspaper and wanted to read it, but there was not enough light at the place where he was sitting. Thus, he wanted to replace his place with the man sitting near



window. Kanai did not want to offend the man so he used tact maxim to persuade him to replace his seat, saying:

- A. "Are Moshai ... If it isn't all important to you, would you mind changing places with me? I have a lot of work to do and the light is better by window" ( 5)

In statement A, the speaker Kanai minimised the cost to the listener and maximised the benefit to him. Kanai tried to be more polite in his statement keeping the scope to the listener to deny Kanai's request. In the above situation, Kanai used the tact maxim that was helpful for him as the man replaced the seat with Kanai.

### **Generosity Maxim**

At the railway station, Kanai found his aunt Nilima Bose, standing to pick him up. She was seventy years old but she had come to station to pick up Kanai. Here while talking Kanai exploited the generosity maxim to appear to be more polite before his aunt. He maximized the benefit to his aunt when he said:

- B. You shouldn't have taken trouble to come to the station (22)  
C. I could have found my way to Lusabari (22)

It is the fine example of the generosity maxim. When the speaker uses this maxim, he means to be more polite in his behaviour as he maximizes the cost himself giving benefit to the listener, who is his Aunt.

### **Approbation Maxim**

When Fokir didn't return home well in time, his mother Moyena visited Kanai's home. She expressed her fear to Kanai as they just heard the roaring sound from the forest and Fokir was still in the forest. Moyena rebuked her son. Here, Kanai used the approbation maxim and minimised the dispraise of Fokir before her mother when he said:

- D. You shouldn't worry...I'm sure that Fokir will take all the right precautions. (155)

Kanai didn't want to offend her mother by using the similar rebuking. She was Fokir's mother, she could say anything to her son but the Kanai did not want to use impolite way of talk so instead of blaming Fokir, he assured his mother that he would be safe in the forest. Therefore, it is evident here that Fokir had used the approbation maxim in this situation.

### **Modesty Maxim**

In modesty maxim, the speaker maximizes the praise of the other and minimizes the dispraise. Piya during her conversation with the stranger who was Kanai realised that he is a



translator and businessman. She was impressed by Kanai's responses. She wanted to be more polite with him, therefore she used the modesty maxim when she replied Kanai. She said

E. You are very observant. (10)

F. You're well informed. (11)

These statements are the illustrations of politeness principle where the modesty maxim has been exploited very cleverly.

### **Agreement Maxim**

During the dialogue between Piya and Kanai, Kanai called Kolkata as Calcutta which was the old name of the city. Piya brought this to his notice. Here Kanai accepts his mistake and agrees with Piya regarding his wrong use of name. He used the agreement maxim when he said:

G. I should be more careful, but renaming was so recent that I get confused sometimes (12)

Here Kanai, the speaker is in agreement with what Piya said.

**The Sympathy Maxim:** Piya Roy in an incident in the train used the sympathy maxim when she spoiled the photocopies of a fellow traveller by spilling tea on it. The man was also scalded by the hot tea,

Piya used following statements

H. Oh, I'm so sorry!

I. Let me help you clean up

J. I'm very sorry. I hope you'll excuse me

In the above statement, the speaker Piyali maximized her sympathy towards the man though he seemed to be irritated. She realised her mistakes and minimised her antipathy towards the man. She knew that the papers spoiled by her must be important for man. In this scenario, she repeatedly used the sympathy maxim to be more polite with man though he was angry. The result of her positive politeness strategy, the man turned down calm and befriended with her.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Amitav Ghosh has wisely used his linguistic skills and moulded it into the politeness strategies through various polite acts of major characters in the novel. In this article the discourse samples are limited to the statements only but this paper could be helpful for further research in the field of pragmatics



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