



Applying Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory on Lady Macbeth's Speech in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Mahmood K. M. Eshreth^{1*} and Yasmin Yasir Draweesh²

^{1*} English Department, Hebron University, Palestine (Corresponding author) Email: maltel2006@yahoo.com

² English Department, Hebron University, Palestine

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Original Research Paper

Keywords:

Politeness
Macbeth
Ideology
Power
Distance

ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to apply Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory on Lady Macbeth's speech in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. By analyzing her dialogues in the play, the researchers try to find the politeness strategies in these dialogues, and the reasons behind preferring the use one strategy over another. After classifying the analyzed selected parts of the play and arranging them according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, the researchers found that power, status and distance play the biggest role in preferring one strategy over the others. Moreover, the findings revealed that Lady Macbeth's ideology leads her to prefer one strategy over another in order to perform her plans successfully.

article citation

Eshreth, M. K. & Yasir Draweesh, Y. (2018). Applying Brown and Levinson's politeness theory on Lady Macbeth's speech in Shakespear's *Macbeth*, *Applied Linguistics Research Journal*, 2(1), 25-32.

1. Introduction

People communicate since they are part of the society. They simply have to talk with each other. It's a fundamental need, and a pleasure for humans to be part of relationships. It's speech which plays the main role in communication. The main function of spoken language is to "socialize individuals to integrate people in social nets by enabling them to communicate in a quick and direct way with immediate feedback from the addressee." (Dontcheva-Navratilovak, 2005, p.66).

Throughout speech one can simplify complicated ideas into a wide range of simple meanings. However, the function of speech is not only to convey information of certain meanings, but it is also connected to interaction between people. This interaction is supposed to be polite. As the majority, if not all, of cultures suggest to enable

the participants of any conversation to feel comfortable, and to enjoy conversations and social interaction in general.

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory was originally published in 1978 and revised in 1987. It has given scholars an enormous amount of analysis methods. Without this theory, we would not be in a position to consider the phenomenon of politeness as a fundamental aspect of human socio- communicative interaction. It provides several presentations of insights into human behavior. Also, it has been saved as a touchstone for other researchers who felt the need to go beyond it. But it is clearly a class of its own in terms of its comprehensiveness, organization and level of argumentation. In fact, according to Aydinoglu (2013), "the notion of politeness and impoliteness has been one of the controversial issues and has been defined in many different ways since politeness theory was first introduced by Brown and Levinson".

Brown and Levinson's model consists of two parts: The first part is the fundamental theory about the nature of politeness and how it functions in interaction. The second part is a list of positive and negative politeness strategies from three languages: Tamil, Tzeltal and English. Brown and Levinson use the term "Face" which is derived from that of Goffman (1967), and from the English folk term, which ties face up with motions of being embarrassed, humiliated or losing face. Thus, face, the public self image consists of two related aspects: The first one is the "positive face" which is the positive aspect self image or personality (including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of). The second aspect is the "negative face", the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, the freedom of action and the freedom of imposition. Therefore, positive politeness is the reduction of a person's public self- image or personality. It also represents similarities among the speaker and the hearer. Then comes the negative politeness, which is the politeness of non-imposition or the "formal politeness".

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory can be applied on any spoken/written material. This paper is an attempt to apply the theory on Lady Macbeth's speech in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Throughout this qualitative study, the researchers are going to explore some politeness strategies in the chosen parts of *Macbeth* by analyzing the quotations.

Macbeth is one of the most famous tragedies in English literature. It's the tragedy of power, murder, ambition and deceit. The three witches' prophecy and Lady Macbeth's ambition lead Macbeth to murder king Duncan. Then, Macbeth sends other murderers in order to kill Banquo and his sons. Later on in the play, Macbeth's attempts to defy the prophecy fail. Then he is killed by Macduff, and Duncan's son, Malcolm, becomes the king.

Lady Macbeth is one of the most powerful female characters in English literature. She is the most frightening female character in Shakespeare's literary works. Lady Macbeth doesn't appear in every scene, but she plays a primary role throughout this tragedy. In the following few pages, the researchers are going to apply Brown and Levinson's politeness theory on the speech of Lady Macbeth through the play to discover the strategies (positive and negative) she follows in order to achieve her goals.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

According to Jucker (2016), fictional texts constitute complex communicative acts between an author and an audience, and they regularly depict interactions between characters. Both levels are susceptible to an analysis of politeness. Many scholars discuss the notion and the definition of "politeness". In their early studies, Brown and Levinson emphasize on the aspect of "face" more than other scholars. Leech (1983) deals with politeness in another way. He uses his "six maxims" to differentiate between the ways in which language is constrained by different social factors. Politeness according to Leech is the polite social behavior within a certain culture. Gu

(1990) explains the "conversational maxims approach". Gu's maxims are a worthy source for cross cultural studies. On the other hand, Fraster and Nolan (1981) consider the politeness as the fulfillment of rights and obligations.

Watts (1989) talks about a "complementary" relationship between Brown and Levinson's face needs, Gu's six maxims and Fraster and Nolan's conversational rights and obligations. Culpeper (1998) states that there is no specific definition or meaning of politeness. He adds that politeness can be recognized by the linguistic strategies. After these different explanations for the notion of "politeness", different studies adopt these explanations in order to analyze some literary works. By using a modified version of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978), Brown and Gilman (1987) have applied their theory on Shakespeare's four tragedies: *Hamlet*, *king Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. They have concluded that in Shakespeare's tragedies, politeness increases because of the power of the hearer more than the power of the speaker.

In his study, Bouchara (2009) has applied Brown and Gilman's method on Shakespeare's four comedies: *Measure of Measure*, *Twelfth Night*, *Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. Bouchara has found minimal contrasts in power since it has the biggest effect on politeness in Shakespeare's comedies. Rossen-Knill (2011) has adopted Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory to analyze *Arthur and George*. She has found that politeness strategies in the dialogue can easily introduce the reader with the different characters in this work. Chun and Yun (2010) have analyzed the apology strategy (negative politeness strategy) in the Chinese novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. They have explained the different variables which determine one's choice of apology. Depending on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, Chikogu (2009) has analyzed the linguistic aspects of politeness in *The Beautification of Area Boy*. He has found that language is the most chosen way to struggle for power. In other words, one's can show his power throughout language.

Fictional texts depict communicative interactions between fictional characters, and, in fact, it is this level of fictional interactions which has received most attention from politeness scholars. This is true not only for Brown and Gilman (1989)'s early application of Brown and Levinson's (1987) conception of positive and negative politeness strategies. It is also true for subsequent scholars who extended the investigations to other theoretical politeness frameworks, to aspects of impoliteness and to other fictional genres, including even film (e.g., Jucker, 2016).

To sum up, not only do Shakespeare's texts to a certain degree reflect the hierarchical fabric of Elizabethan society (Holz, 1999), where rituals of politeness were required due to differences in power and rank, but they also show plenty of characters who want to achieve their ends and utilize strategies of politeness, sometimes coupled with the height of hypocrisy, to do this; Lady Macbeth is a point in case.

3. Method

This section aims to describe the research design. It gives more details about the study material, the participants, the purpose of the study and finally the research questions.

3.1. Material

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the basic material of this research. The researcher tries to analyze Lady Macbeth's speech in this Shakespearian tragedy. The selected quotations will be classified in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness.

3.2. Participants

The main characters in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who have their conversations with Lady Macbeth, are the participants. Lady Macbeth's dialogues throughout the play were the start point to begin the analysis of this research. The following are main characters in the play:

Duncan: king of Scotland; Malcolm: Duncan's elder son; Macbeth: Thane of Glaims and later the King; Lady Macberth, then the Queen; Banque: A Scottish Thane; and Macduff: Thane of Fife.

3.3. *Purpose of the Study*

The current research explores the use of positive politeness strategies and negative politeness strategies in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. More specifically, the study aims at exploring investigating which strategies are the most used by Lady Macbeth throughout the play. Moreover, the study attempts to find the impact of some factors, including power and distance on preferring one strategy over another.

3.4. *Research Questions*

The researchers raise two questions to be answered throughout this paper:

Question one: What are the basic politeness strategies used in Lady Macbeth's speech in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?

Question two: What factors may affect the use of one politeness strategy over another in Lady Macbeth's speech in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?

4. *Data Analysis*

According to Jucker (2016, p. 96), "Literary texts can be seen as communicative acts between real authors and real readers even if the text is read by readers who live centuries after the author" and even if the author could not possibly have had a clear image of his or her potential audience or even of the fact that his or her texts would still be read long after his or her death.

According to Brown and Levinson(1978), the strategies of politeness involve three broad mechanisms: the speaker may convey that some wants, goals, desires, or objects of the hearer are admirable and interesting to him too. Also, the speaker may stress common membership in a group or category, and thus, emphasizing that both speaker and hearer belong to some set of persons who share some wants. The last mechanism is that the speaker can claim common perspectives with the hearer without necessarily referring to in group membership.

Lady Macbeth appears for the first time in the play when a messenger comes and tells her that Duncan, the king, is going to visit them tonight in order to thank Macbeth for his courage in the last battle. Moreover, the king is going to name Macbeth as the Thane of Cawdor. Then, Macbeth comes. Lady Macbeth tries to welcome him in a special way. She says: "*Great Glaims! Worthy Cawdor! Greater than both, by the all hail hereafter.*" (Act1, scene5, p. 42). It is clear that Lady Macbeth is about to start her evil plan. When she describes her husband using such words, actually she uses one of Brown and Levinson's negative strategies, which is "give differences". Brown and Levinson state that this strategy occurs when "hearer is of a higher social status than speaker, and the speaker is certainly not in a position to coerce hearer's compliance in any way" (p. 178). Lady Macbeth tries to raise the power of Macbeth. As a result, he can feel that he has the courage to do what she is asking him to do. Lady Macbeth, by using these terms, she already has made a distance between them. In fact, she knows that this distance does not exist, and that she can easily call him Macbeth, but in order to start her plan, she prefers to call him "Thane of Cawdor". Brown and Levinson use the word "honorifics" to describe the using of such kinds of term addresses. They write that "honorifics directly or indirectly convey a status differential between speaker and addressee or referent" (p. 179).

As a result, Macbeth replies: "*my dearest love*" (act1, scene5, p. 42). Macbeth in this context is using "in-group identity markers" as Brown and Levinson call them. He uses such markers to refer to his wife. This is an example of positive politeness strategy. Macbeth, unlike his wife, tries to shorten the distance between them (actually this is the normal life between husbands). Until this moment, Macbeth doesn't know what is going on inside his wife's head during her speech of what they should do that night (when the king is their host).

Lady Macbeth tries to encourage her husband in order to feel more powerful than what he really is. The subject they are talking about is a risk itself since killing the king cannot be discussed with anyone. The topic they are talking about is very sensitive. Despite this, Lady Macbeth shows an example of the use of these sociological variables (distance and risk in this example) in her speech.

The above analysis is in line with Culpeper (1996, p. 364) who argues that "Macbeth and Lady Macbeth go out of their way to be polite to the assembled Lords and thus re-establish and maintain a situation of equilibrium which is violently threatened by the appearance of the ghost". In this situation, Lady Macbeth uses impoliteness towards her husband to goad his manliness and push him into action. She asks him: "Are you a man?"

Then in the next scene, the king and his men reach Macbeth's castle. Although King Duncan uses in-group markers when he is talking with Lady Macbeth, Lady Macbeth herself uses specific terms to show the distance between them. The King describes Lady Macbeth as "*our honest hostess*" (Act1, scene 6, p. 43). The King is very proud of Macbeth as a brave hero in his army. Therefore, the king uses this positive politeness strategy to show that he is very close to Macbeth and his wife, as if they are members of the same group. Moreover, in the previous scene, Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth that they should appear in a peaceful mood because if they get troubled, they will arouse suspicion. In accordance with this piece of advice, Lady Macbeth tries to show the King that they are his servants, and as a result there is a great gap between them (social distance).

Moreover, Lady Macbeth tells the king that everything belongs to him, and they feel glad to give the King back anything he wants. For example, Lady Macbeth says to the king: "*we are your servants ever*" and "*your majesty*". She insists on keeping the distance and increasing the king's feeling of his power. According to Brown and Levinson, this negative politeness strategy creates "formality" between the speaker and the hearer, and this is what Lady Macbeth wants. She wants the King to feel that they all are his servants, and it is safe to spend the next night in their castle. Lady Macbeth wants the king to feel that with these honest people (Macbeth and his wife) since he will be protected against any external threaten.

In act 1, scene 6, Lady Macbeth discusses her plan with Macbeth. She knows that her husband is hesitant, and he is not sure what he should do. "Avoid disagreement" is the sixth positive politeness strategy in Brown and Levinson's list. Also, "include both speaker and hearer in the same activity" is the twelfth strategy in the same list. Lady Macbeth follows these two strategies in order to convince her husband to do what she wants him to do. She agrees with him that this is a big adventure, and it is very hard to commit such a crime. At the same time, she tells Macbeth that she is standing with him, and she is ready to help him in every possible way.

Using the above positive politeness strategies helps the hearer to feel that the speaker is very close to him, and he (the speaker) is ready to do anything to make the hearer feel satisfied. Then, in act 2, scene 2, Macbeth comes back to his chamber after he kills the king. Now, Lady Macbeth is more relaxed than before. At least, there is a part of her plan which comes true. Throughout her dialogue with Macbeth in this scene, Lady Macbeth does not use the "in-group identity markers" nor the "honorifics" markers. At the beginning of the play, she uses these markers a lot in order to attract Macbeth and to persuade him to follow her ideas.

Lady Macbeth makes her husband feel that he is the next king, and he deserves to be so. But now, after she realizes that he is following her and he will execute the whole plan, she becomes more comfortable in her speech. The entire scene (the second scene in Act Two) is a long conversation between Lady Macbeth and her husband.

Throughout the dialogue, the reader can easily feel that Lady Macbeth has more power since she speaks as if she is certain about what will happen later on. Brown and Levinson choose "*assert or presuppose speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants*" to be the ninth positive politeness strategy. Lady Macbeth listens to her husband's questions and affairs. She seems to be more constant than him. She gives answers, reasons, and explanations for her husband's questions. For example, when Macbeth tells her that he is afraid to think of what he has done, and he can't go back to the King's chamber to return the daggers, she replies: "*give me the daggers, the speaking and the dead are but as pictures, 'tis the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil. If he do bleed, I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, for it must seem their guilt*" (act 2, scene 2, p. 52).

Lady Macbeth tells her husband that sleep is the other image of death, and he must not be afraid of those sleepy guards, because both of them can not hurt him. Lady Macbeth is talking to Macbeth as if she is putting herself in his place. She informs her husband that it's very easy to go back and put the daggers there. She knows what he wants to hear, and speaks according to this point.

When the men in the castle discover that their king is killed, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth come to the king's chamber, as if they are surprised and shocked. "Using solidarity in-group identity markers" is a very important strategy among Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategies. It is used to show the speaker's sympathy with the hearer, and that he (the speaker) is sharing the hearer his feelings. Lady Macbeth uses this strategy when they tell her that the king is killed. She says: "*our royal master's murdered! Woe, alas!*". (act 2, scene 3, p. 55). Lady Macbeth acts as if she is very sad of hearing such news. She wants to be in the safe side, and not to let any one suspect that she may be the killer of the king (with her husband of course). On the contrary, Macduff (Thane of Fife), when hearing her words, he feels with her and immediately replies: "*o, gentle lady*" (act 2, scene 3, p. 55). This is exactly what she wants to hear. Now, Lady Macbeth is sure that no one will accuse Macbeth, or even think that he maybe the killer of the king.

After the king is killed, lady Macbeth appears again in act 3, scene1 when Macbeth becomes the king, and she becomes the queen. With her new position, Lady Macbeth is ready to start acting in a different way. She tries to be part of the whole, and to give the others the feeling that is she is one of them. In fact, she wants to support the idea that they all belong to the same group. Brown and Levinson (1987) describe this in one of their positive politeness strategies. They talk about in-group identity markers as one distinguished feature of this strategy. Lady Macbeth uses the words "we" and "us" to refer to the people and to herself at the same time. For example, when she asks the officers to come in order to eat with Macbeth, the king, she says: "*our great feast*" (Act 3, scene 1, p. 60). Again, Lady Macbeth wants to make these men feel as if they really belong to the same group. As a result, they will stay loyal for her and for the new king.

After the first part of the witches' prophecy comes true and Macbeth becomes the king, Lady Macbeth starts thinking about the second part of the prophecy. The three witches tell Macbeth that he will become the king, and Banque's sons will become kings too. Lady Macbeth and her husband decide to kill Banque and his sons in order to guarantee the throne for a long time. It is clear that Lady Macbeth is a distinguished character on all levels, and she is an example of the unusual woman. Generally speaking, for most people, it is common to be more informal with your family members, and more formal with others. Lady Macbeth is totally the opposite. According to her policy, she appears to be more formal with her husband, but less formal with others (the officers, the servants and other gentlemen). Lady Macbeth knows what she wants. She calls Macbeth "*My Lord and Gentle my Lord*" (Act 2, scene 2. pp. 64-65). She knows that such expressions can give her husband more power, and help her to convince him with her plan. After the first part of the prophecy comes true, Lady Macbeth follows the same technique in order to achieve the rest of her dreams. She knows that Macbeth is afraid, and he doesn't want to kill Banque and his sons. She works on increasing the power of Macbeth. At the same time, she

increases the distance between them, so that Macbeth can feel his power and superiority.

Therefore, it is clear that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness owes much to Erving Goffman's (1976) ideas on *deference* and *demeanor*. In fact, Lady Macbeth tries to reduce the distance variable between her (as a queen), and the others, even the servants. From the very beginning, Lady Macbeth tells her husband that he must act very normally, and tries to be kind and friendly with everyone. Following Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory, Lady Macbeth is using more negative politeness strategies with Macbeth. On the other hand, she uses more positive politeness strategies with others. For example, in act 3, scene 3, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and some lords are there in the castle. Lady Macbeth calls Macbeth while they are talking "*thanks to your Majesty*" (act 3, scene 3, p. 67). Then, after few lines, she describes the lords as "*all our friends*" (Act 3, scene 3, p. 67). Using different terms of address helps Lady Macbeth in persuading the others that she is a good woman. She appears as if she loves her husband and respects him, but at the same time, she is kind with others, even if they come from lower classes (since she is the queen). Lady Macbeth appears for the last time in act 5, scene 1. She becomes ill and walks in her sleep. Also, she imagines that there is invisible blood wiping from her hands. Now, Lady Macbeth is confused. She speaks unconsciously, and she doesn't follow any roles or strategies. Lady Macbeth answers the doctor when he asks what is going on with her: "*To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate; come, come, come, come, give me your hand: what's done, cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.*" (Act 5, scene 1, p. 92). She repeats her words, and she imagines unreal events. Moreover, she seems to be afraid and doesn't want to remember what she has done before. Macbeth knows that his wife is dead in act 5, scene 5. This is the last time Lady Macbeth's name is mentioned in the play.

According to Hammond (2017, p. 46), politeness is about being tactful and considerate for the plight of others in any social interaction (cited in Brown & Levinson, 1987). This affirms that everybody has a 'face' to protect in every social interaction. Invariably, this avowed awareness of the 'face needs' of interlocutors can be achieved through the conscious adherence to the influence of contexts and other social factors such as the content of the interaction.

5. Conclusion

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the characters, especially Lady Macbeth, use each politeness strategy for a purpose. Each character has its own ambitions, dreams and plans. To achieve these goals, they have to speak and socialize with each other. The upper class characters need to speak and communicate with lower class characters and vice versa. The use of politeness strategies serves some characters to end up with their aims achieved. Since this play is a tragedy, the end will not be a happy one. The reader may feel sad for what happens to some characters. For Lady Macbeth, she follows a constant ideology from the very beginning of the play. She insists to use certain terms and expressions. She knows when to speak directly, and when to speak indirectly. She knows when to be formal, and when to be informal. Even though she doesn't follow the common rules, she believes that her strategy will lead to success. Words are swords. Lady Macbeth applies her words to fit up with her ambitions. She uses all strategies in the right time and place. In other words, one's appropriate speech can be the best server in many situations. The study therefore concludes that signalling politeness or impoliteness is context, culture, and structure specific.

The last quotation in this paper is the quotation which was chosen by Brown and Levinson (1987) to be the first three lines of the introduction of their famous book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. "The human personality is a scared thing; one dare not violate it nor infringe its bounds, while at the same time the greatest good is in communication with others." Durkheim's previous words from the year 1915 reflect the situation nowadays also. Human personality, like a fingerprint, differs from one person to another, but there are

some similarities shared by all humans. The need to communicate with others is a vital requirement, and humans can live without these activities: speak, communicate and socialize.

References

- Aydinoglu, N. (2013). Politeness and impoliteness strategies: An analysis of gender differences in GERALYN I. HORTON'S plays. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 83, 473 – 482.
- Bouchara, A. (2009). *Politeness in Shakespeare: Applying Brown and Levinson's politeness theory to Shakespeare's Comedies*. Burger: Diplomica Verlag.
- Brown, P. & Gilman, A. (1989). Politeness theory in Shakespeare's four major tragedies. *Language in Society*, 18, 159-212.
- Brown, P & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chikogu, R, N. (2009). A Pragmatic study of the linguistic concept of politeness and change in social relations of power in Wole Soyinka's the Beautification of Area Boy. *English Text Construction*, 1, 264-287.
- Claderwood, J, L. (1987). Speech and self in Othello. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38 (3): 293-303.
- Culpeper, J. (1996). Towards an anatomy of impoliteness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25. 349–367.
- Culpeper, J. (1998). (Im) Politeness in dramatic dialogue: Exploring the language of drama. *From Text to Context*. 83-95.
- Dontcheva-Navratilova, O. (2005). *Grammatical structure in English: Meaning in context*. Brno: Masarykova University.
- Fraster, B. & Nolen, W. (1981). The Association of deference with linguistic forms. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 27, 93-109.
- Goffman, E. (1976). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face to face behavior*. Garden City, New York.
- Gu, Y. (1990). Politeness Phenomena in Modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 237-257.
- Hammond, Ch. (2017). Politeness in administrative discourse: Some perspectives from two institutions in Ghana. *Journal of Universal Language* ,18(1), 35-67.
- Holz, M. (1999). Manifestations of politeness in Shakespeare's dramatic works, Munich, GRIN Verlag, <https://www.grin.com/document/114559>
- Jucher, A. (2016). Politeness in eighteenth-century drama: A discursive approach. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 12(1): 95–115.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Rossen- Knill, D. F. (2011). How dialogue creates opposite characters: An Analysis of Arthur & George. *Language and Literature*, 20, 34-58.
- Shakespeare, W. (2005). *Macbeth*. Wordsworth Edition Limited. Ware, Hertfordshire.
- Watts, R. (1989). Relevance and relational work: Linguistic politeness as politic behavior. *Multilingua*, 8 (2/3), 131-166.