A Research on English Business Negotiation Strategies in the Framework of Politeness Theory

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Business negotiation is essentially a kind of economic activity by means of language. Its success depends on the use of language, especially polite wording. This article, in the framework of politeness theory, studies the politeness strategies of business negotiation and emphasizes its importance. This article mainly focuses on negative politeness strategies and positive politeness strategies raised by Brown and Levinson. It discusses specific linguistic strategies of negative politeness and positive politeness from two aspects, words and phrases as well as sentences. It is concluded that negotiators can resort to some pragmatic rules and linguistic patterns to be more polite in business negotiations but they should use these strategies flexibly to suit different situations.

Keywords: business negotiation, politeness theory, positive politeness, negative politeness

Introduction

As globalization develops, global trade becomes more and more frequent. After investigation and research, effective business negotiation and communication can bring high profits and benefits, while lack of negotiation skills may cause the failure of trade. It requires the two parties to express their opinions in a specific context so as to effectively achieve their goals. Business negotiation is largely achieved by means of language, so effective negotiation strategies play a vital role.

In fact, language is used daily, so negotiators may ignore the basic role that language plays in business negotiation. Yet language skills can help promote the success of negotiation. Appropriate words are polite, which can preserve positive or negative faces of the hearer’s as well as speaker’s. However, inappropriate language is nothing less than hurting the hearer’s self-esteem or imposing restrictions on the hearer, or even destroying the business negotiation. So language for negotiators is by no means a small thing.

This article attempts to help business negotiators collaborate with each other by adopting appropriate linguistic strategies in the framework of politeness theory, and ultimately promote the efficiency of business negotiations. It will focus on negative politeness strategies and positive politeness strategies.

Theoretical Framework

In 1987, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that politeness was a universal concept, which has had some disagreement within academia. Their theory chiefly contains three fundamental concepts: face, face-threatening acts (FTAs for short), and politeness strategies.
Brown and Levinson’s face theory argues that face has two aspects: positive face and negative face. The former one is to get appreciation and love from someone else. And the latter one does not want others to force themselves and want to act freely. They also develop two kinds of politeness based on these two faces. One is negative politeness, which is used as a way to communicate with the hearer in a non-imposing way. Doing things like offering an apology, being indirect, using hedges or question, etc., are ways to create distance between the two sides. The other is positive politeness, which is used as a way to make the hearer feel a sense of closeness and belonging. These strategies include things like noticing changes in another, choosing appropriate subjects, seeking agreement and avoiding disputes, making jokes, etc.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a face threatening act is an act that inherently damages the face of the hearer or the speaker by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. In Brown and Levinson’s view, face threatening acts (FTAs) are bound to occur in interpersonal communication, which always pose a threat to people’s communication. Therefore, people must handle it through some effective strategies.

Brown and Levinson (1987) outline five main types of politeness strategies: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record (indirect) as well as simply not using the face-threatening act.

The above politeness theories are closely interconnected. They have common parts and the last one is based on the former ones. They develop in chronological order. This article will study the strategies of business negotiation according to politeness theories of Lakoff (1972), Leech (1983), as well as Brown and Levinson (1987). This article especially focuses on politeness strategies.

**Politeness Strategies for FTAs in Business Negotiation**

Business negotiation is a process filled with arguments and conflicts. The two sides are competitive, but meanwhile they should maintain cooperative relation. Therefore, in order to make the negotiation successful and achieve their final interest respectively, the speaker must use appropriate strategies, such as linguistic strategies. In this part, through lots of cases, some pragmatic rules and linguistic patterns will be found. Firstly, we will explore the negative politeness strategies in business negotiation.

Negative politeness strategies are oriented to the hearer’s negative face and emphasize avoiding imposition on the hearer. According to Brown and Levinson, seven specific strategies have been proposed in negative politeness strategies: be indirect, use hedges or questions, be pessimistic, minimize the imposition, use obviating structures like nominalizations, passives, or statements of general rules, apologetic, and use plural pronouns. Some of them can be used in business negotiation. Therefore, here are some strategies concluded from those seven strategies that will help save faces of the hearers:

**Hedging Words and Phrases**

Hedges are words whose job is to make things fuzzy (Zhou, 2001, p. 13). If there is an unpleasant thing such as delay in payment of one party, the other party can use hedges that indicate degree, such as some, sort of, kind of, which can soften the tone and avoid being too rude.

In addition, there are hedges that express attitudes, such as I believe, I suppose, I’m afraid, etc. For example: I’m afraid I can’t agree with the price you set (Tang, 1998, p. 18).

Compared with “I can’t agree with the price you set”, which is rude and put imposition on the hearer, the above example is more soft and polite.
Hedges are not used only in one way. Hedging words such as quite, very, pretty, greatly can also be used as the strategy for positive face to increase the degree of compliment and appreciation. It also embodies approbation principle.

**Personal Pronoun**

Person deixis refers to the form of address of the two sides of the conversation when communicating information with words (He, 1988, p. 19). And Pronouns in English are typical person deixis in pragmatics. In business English, appropriate personal pronouns can make your language more polite and euphemistic.

You-attitude can be adopted in English negotiation, which means using more second person pronouns such as you and your instead of first person pronouns such as I, we, my, our. For instance:

a. I think that you did a good job in selling our products.

b. You did a good job in selling our products (He, 2001, p. 76).

In the above examples, b sounds more polite than a. In sentence a, “I think” give the listener a feeling that it is only a subjective praise. Sentence b uses second person pronoun “you”, which removes subjective attitude and shows that it is customer-centric. It makes the hearer feel his importance. At the same time, it embodies tact principle.

**Nominalization**

First, let’s look at a set of examples:

a. We regret that we cannot dispatch the goods before October.

b. It is regretted/regrettable that we cannot dispatch the goods before October.

c. It is our regret that we cannot dispatch the goods before October.

Sentence c sounds more formal than sentence b and a. As the predicate is nominalized, the sentence becomes more formal. Though formal or informal cannot be seen as a principle for politeness or impoliteness, nominalization minimizes the imposition on the listener.

In addition to predicates, subjects and complements can also be nominalized, for example:

a. I am surprised that you failed to dispatch the goods.

b. I am surprised at your failure to dispatch the goods.

By avoiding using the verb, b sounds more formal and polite. Nominalization removes the verb, which is less imposing. In all, nominalization minimizes the imposition on the hearer.

**Positive Words**

Positive words contain positive affective meaning, which gives people a sense of pleasure. So they are lubricants for business communication and they can minimize imposition on the hearer so as to save the hearer’s negative face. On the contrary, negative words emphasize negative aspects, which gives the hearer an unpleasant hint and may threaten the hearer’s face. Therefore, in the negotiations, negotiators should avoid the negative words as much as possible and choose positive words. For example:

a. We have to remind you that our contract will terminate in November.

b. Note that our contract will be valid until November.

The two sentences both imply that the other party should perform the contract during validity period. However, sentence a uses the negative word “terminate” and stresses the termination time of the contract, giving the hearer a sense of oppression. The warning tone will threaten the hearer’s negative face, while sentence b uses the positive word “valid”, which stresses the validity of the contract, showing the positive side.
It implies that the other side still have time to do the unfinished business, which reduces the imposition on the hearer.

**Interrogative Sentences**

Leech (1983) uses many examples to interpret Tact Maxim in his book. We can arrange sentences according to these examples in descending order of politeness, that is, virtual interrogative sentences, interrogative sentences, affirmative sentences, and imperative sentences. This shows interrogative question with subjunctive is most polite.

Firstly, it is obvious that turning imperative sentences and affirmative sentences into interrogative sentences can make a request more polite and acceptable. For example: Will you pass me the water? Pass me the water. Obviously, the former is more polite. This method can also be used in business negotiation, which can achieve good effects. For example:

a. You should firstly give us the sample.
b. Can you give us the sample firstly?

We can see that sentence b softens the tone and leaves more space to the listener by using interrogative question, which minimizes the imposition on the hearer and saves the negative face of the hearer.

The interrogative question with subjunctive is the most polite while requiring the hearer to do something. For instance:

Could/Would/Might you deliver the first 100 tons before September?

From the above example, by using “could”, “would”, “might”, the request would sound more polite and its imposition upon the hearer can be reduced. At the same time, if the speaker is refused, he would not lose his face with such a soft tone.

In addition to interrogative questions, subjunctive mood is often used in business negotiations in another form. For example:

a. We obtain the goods before September.
b. We would be happy if we could obtain the goods before September.

Sentence b sounds less aggressive and is more acceptable than sentence a by using subjunctive mood.

**Passive Voice**

In daily life, people often like speaking their mind directly. In business negotiations, negotiators can also use active voice to express their opinions directly. Nevertheless, when demanding, advising, or suggesting, it would be better for negotiators to choose passive voice because it is always very rude and aggressive to demand or require others directly. Passive voice can be used to reduce imposition on the hearer by the way of impersonalization. For example:

Shipment should be made before October; otherwise we are not able to catch the season.

Compared with “I think shipment should be made before October” and “You should make shipment before October”, the sentence seems that no-one is requested in particular. It sounds more distant and polite.

The passive voice can be adopted to eliminate reference only to the speaker:

a. I regret that the wrong goods have been dispatched.
b. It is regretted that the wrong goods have been dispatched.

In the above examples, sentence a sounds aggressive while sentence b tells a fact rather than blaming the hearer, which is more polite. By replacing the active voice with passive voice, the speaker who is performing the FTAs minimizes imposition on the hearer.
In addition, passive voice can be adopted to remove reference to the hearer, for example:

a. You should execute the first order by the 31st.
b. The first order should be executed by the 31st.

Sentence a sounds too aggressive and is not beneficial to cooperative relations in negotiations. In sentence b, “You” is omitted and it saves the hearer’s negative face.

Furthermore, passive voice can eliminate reference to both speaker and hearer, for instance:

a. You didn’t list the specification we need.
b. The specification we need wasn’t listed here.
c. The specification as required wasn’t listed here.

Sentence a with the reference to both the speaker and the hearer is the most impolite. Sentence b without reference to the hearer sounds more polite. Sentence c is the most polite one.

All in all, passive voice is a good method to preserve the negative faces of both parties.

Positive politeness strategies are adopted to make the listener feel a sense of closeness and belonging in that the speaker can show something in common with the hearer to protect his positive face. Negotiators can use these strategies to make the listener feel better about themselves. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), eight specific strategies have been put forward in negative politeness strategies: attend to the hearer’s interests, needs, wants, use solidarity in-group identity markers, be optimistic, include both speaker and hearer in activity, offer or promise, exaggerate interest in hearer and his interests, avoid disagreement, joke. Some of them can be used in business negotiation. Therefore, here are some linguistic strategies concluded from those eight strategies that will help save faces of the hearers:

**Hedging Words and Phrases**

As we have talked above, hedging words and phrases can be used in negative politeness to redress the FTAs. They can also be used in positive politeness, such as rather, quite, pretty, greatly, etc. For instance:

Perhaps you don’t quite understand the major features of this new model.

We are greatly looking forward to your cooperation.

The word “quite” in the above sentence serves to soften the power of suggesting or criticizing or complaining, and thus showing that the speaker is trying to save the hearer’s positive face. And “greatly” serves to increase the degree of expectation or appreciation, which maintains people’s positive face.

**Compliment**

As a positive politeness strategy, compliments clearly indicate that the negotiating party intends to promote or consolidate friendships or partnerships with each other. Foreign business negotiators can use compliments to achieve good negotiation and maintain good interpersonal relationships. For example:

We have looked all over Asia for a manufacturer; your company is the most suitable.

Only very special customers do we give them 10 percent discount.

You are a real businessman.

The compliments like the above examples can satisfy the hearer’s positive face and improve the atmosphere of negotiation, which can make the exchanges between the two parties smoother and more effective, and create a good atmosphere for future negotiations.

**The Transitional Word “But”**

In most cases, the two parties in negotiation are full of conflicts and confrontations. And it is inevitable to
deny the other side’s views. The negotiation process will become a dispute from beginning to end if the face of the other party cannot be properly taken care of. Not only will the negotiation process be tense and unpleasant, but it will ultimately affect the outcome of the negotiations and reduce the possibility of long-term cooperation. Therefore, how to properly say No is a problem that needs serious attention in business negotiations. In practice, one effective method is to use “but” to show agreement before disagreement. Therefore, when showing disagreement, the following sentence patterns can be used:

I understand what you mean, but I am aware that...
I got it. Good. But sometimes...

The communication method that shows agreement before disagreement can better resolve the hostility and resistance of the other party when they hear the disagreement and help the conversation to proceed in a friendly atmosphere.

Tag Questions

Using tag questions is a means of positive politeness by which the speaker makes the assumption that the listener can accept his utterances and behaviors. For instance:

I have a hard time giving you 15% discount, didn’t I?
This sounds as if that the listener have the common knowledge with the speaker.
In addition, the application of “you know” serves the same way with “didn’t I”, for example:

I have a hard time giving you 15% discount, you know.

In the above example, the speaker makes the assumption that the listener has the common knowledge with him. Meanwhile the hearer would be satisfied with the approval offered by the speaker so that the disagreement shown by the speaker will do little harm to hearer’s positive face.

Compound Sentence

In business negotiation, disagreement and conflicts are inevitable. In accordance with the face theory of Brown and Levinson (1987), refusals will pose a threat to one’s positive face. In business negotiation, if some advice or suggestions are refused directly, the positive face of the hearer would be threatened and the hearer may lose the interest to continue the negotiation. So when disagreement is inevitable, how can people express their different opinions without stimulating each other and threatening the other party’s face? The sentence patterns such as “I’m sorry”, “I’m afraid”, “It seems that” can be used to soften the tone. For example:

a. I can’t agree to such high price.
b. I’m sorry to say, I can hardly agree to such high price.

Obviously, sentence b is more polite than a. The word “hardly” also makes the utterance more acceptable. Here is another example:

I’m afraid that I couldn’t agree to such terms.
The sentence uses the phrase “I’m afraid that”, which can soften the utterance and is more euphemistic.
In addition, the sentence patterns like “I understand your position, but...”, “You may be right, but...” can also be used to reduce disagreements. For example:

a. It is impossible to accept this price.
b. I understand your position, but this price is too high to accept.

Sentence b is more moderate and euphemistic than sentence a, which not only shows his own attitude but also avoids refusing directly.
Passive Voice

In business negotiation, it is always unwise to condemn, criticize, or disagree with others. So the negotiator can impersonalize the hearer by the use of passive voice. As redressive method for FTAs, passive voice can save not only negative face of the hearer but also positive face of the hearer. Here are some examples:

a. You have made a mistake here.
   b. A mistake has been made here.
   a. We can’t accept your quotation.
   b. Your quotation cannot be accepted.

The first set of examples is a criticism, which poses a threat to the hearer’s positive face. However, by using passive voice, the speaker can avoid direct reference, which sounds more polite. In the second set of examples, the speaker shows his rejection, and the listener’s positive face will be threatened. By using passive form, the speaker can avoid directly mentioning his party, which can save the hearer’s positive face.

Humorous Language

In business negotiation, the two sides will keep competing and arguing. Sometimes, they will come to a deadlock, which will make the atmosphere become awkward. At this moment, humor can play a vital role in communication.

Let’s look at the following dialogue:

a. I have a small gift for you.
   b. Thank you, can I open it now?
   a. Of course.
   b. China tea set! So beautiful!
   a. Yes, it is! Today is Friday, and if a fight breaks out later I have something to throw. And if not, I would make Chinese tea for you all. We could enjoy our weekend, right? (smile)
   b. You are so humorous! (laugh) (Liu, 2016, p. 178)

In the above example, when the negotiation comes to a deadlock, the Chinese representative a sends a gift to b and he uses his humor to defuse the awkward situation. What a means is that if the negotiation fails and the two sides will attack each other, he can use the tea set as a weapon. It is obvious that b understands the humor and laughs and the atmosphere becomes relaxing and also both sides become closer under this atmosphere, which can make the negotiation go on well.

Conclusion

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), five main types of politeness strategies are outlined as follows: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record (indirect) as well as simply not using the face-threatening act. This article only focuses on negative politeness, which is used to save negative face in view of increasing distance, and positive politeness, which is adopted to save positive face in view of decreasing distance. To support negative face, the negotiator can resort to hedges, positive words, nominalization, interrogative sentences or impersonalization, etc. To support negative face, the negotiator can resort to hedges, compliment, tag questions, compound sentences or passive voice, humor, etc. All in all, when the speaker conducts FTAs, he can use some linguistic strategies to save faces of both sides.
However, the most polite language is not necessarily the most appropriate. Wise negotiators will not just follow these strategies, but will adopt these strategies flexibly to suit different situations and different cultures.

References