Politeness and Speaker Investment: A sociolinguistic study of politeness in political conversations

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This study examines interactions of politeness and the social factors posited by Brown and Levinson (1987) (B&L) and proposes SPEAKER INVESTMENT as the commonality between social factors contributing to politeness. This study addresses some criticisms of B&L, taking a quantitative approach. Politeness was tested concerning reactions to Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson's protest of President Bush, Q1-Q4. Questions were asked in sociolinguistic interviews in which 20 students each interviewed one Utah native. This study's questions occurred about ½ -1 hour into the second interview.

Q1. Do you participate in local politics?
Q2. Do you know about Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson?
Q3. How did you feel about his protest of President Bush?
Q4. Do you think his actions are protected under the First Amendment guaranteeing free speech?

Interviewee's responses are face-threatening acts (FTA) because a bold, on-record opinion is stated. Politeness was considered in relation to three factors: rank of imposition (Rx), social distance between speaker and hearer (D(S,H)), and relative power between speaker and hearer (P(S,H)). Rx was manipulated within questions. D(S,H) and P(S,H) were balanced between speakers, with D(S,H) based on self-evaluations and P(S,H) represented by age (18-25, 35-45, and over 60) and gender.

I propose the social variable, SPEAKER INVESTMENT, as the consistent factor in the high politeness groups (high Rx, high D(S,H), same gender, and middle age group), where each social factor corresponds to a specific type of SPEAKER INVESTMENT: successfully mitigating the FTA, creating a relationship, maintaining gender-based group identity, and linguistic marketplace. Figure 1 shows the effect of SPEAKER INVESTMENT (SI) on politeness, where SI is evaluated on a scale of 1 (low) to 9 (high). These findings have implications for understanding the importance of B&L's social factors in the evaluation of politeness and point to a motivation for their shared effect.