

Sara Mills (2003). *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 270 pp., ISBN Hb 0 521 81084 1, Pb 0 521 00919 7.

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This book re-examines research on women's and men's use of politeness in a critical way, calling attention to a number of problems related with the application by these studies of Brown & Levinson's model (1978, 1987). In contrast to the view of politeness as the performance of specific speech acts that has expanded from the establishment of this framework, the author proposes a more interactional perspective on the issue that takes into account both the speaker's production and the hearer's reception of the utterances, on the basis of a conception of politeness as a judgement of the interactants. From the development of this new perspective, Mills critically reviews studies on women's and men's use of politeness, trying to show the problems that arise in the interpretation of data as a result of the application of Brown and Levinson's model. Likewise, drawing on the performative theoretical perspective that most language and gender researchers are currently advocating, the author maintains that the contention commonly defended by these studies that 'women are more polite' than men, is more based on a stereotypical view of 'women's language' than on actual women's linguistic behaviour.

The structure of the book can be described as composed of two main parts, if we exclude the introductory and conclusive sections. In the first part, which comprises three chapters, the text focuses on a critical re-examination of Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, beginning with a rethinking about the way many linguists in general put the speaker implicitly (and, in some cases, even explicitly) at the centre of attention in their analyses of data. Thus, considering her/him as an autonomous person who consciously chooses to use certain language items and strategies rather than others, and assuming that they can unequivocally determine which are the intentions of their productions. This initial chapter ("Rethinking linguistic interpretation") is important to the extent that establishes the basis of the criticism directed at Brown and Levinson's model of politeness that the author develops subsequently. In the following two chapters ("Theorizing politeness" and "Politeness and impoliteness"), Mills makes this model problematic because of its assumption that certain speech acts are intrinsically polite (or impolite), and that these are unequivocally used by speakers to show concern or deference by others (or, on the contrary, to be 'unfriendly' or 'disrespectful'). In contrast to this perspective, the author maintains that, instead of assuming that politeness can be objectively found in specific speaker's productions, we should also take into account the hearer's

interpretation of those productions, and be more aware of the fact that ‘polite’ or ‘impolite’ behaviour is in fact a highly subjective matter. Therefore, what Mills proposes is to look at politeness as an assessment of the interactants that varies to a great extent according to multiple contextual factors such as gender, class, race, the communicative circumstances, and the way the individual is related to the particular community of practice. In arguing for this new perspective, Mills calls then attention, for example, to the question that politeness should not be necessarily considered as a ‘good thing’, as Brown and Levinson’s model does, when many speakers assert that they consider it as ‘insincere’ behaviour that is directed at the achievement of some long-term goal. Another example, is the question that the performance of speech acts such as insults, which would be considered as inherently impolite within the questioned model, do in fact function as signals of camaraderie among the members of certain communities of practice, such as the young Black males studied by Labov (1972). In this sense, the book defends the necessity of addressing the analysis of politeness in a more cautious and contextualised manner, adopting a wider perspective on data that looks at utterances at the level of interaction, and trying to consider all the possible variables that inflect the production and reception of politeness by interactants. Along with a detailed review of the literature on the topic, in the first part of the book, the author introduces the telling of personal anecdotes, the responses of informants to interviews she carried out on perceptions of politeness, and an illustrative analysis of extensive conversational extracts, concluding in a very convincing way, that the consideration of certain utterances as manifestations of politeness or impoliteness, is more complex than what Brown and Levinson’s model suggests, and that, even if the analyst is present at the recorded interactions, and/or has interviews with the participants at her/his disposal, in fact, it is impossible in some cases to determine what is exactly going on in the interaction.

The second part of the book focuses specifically on politeness in connection with gender issues, and comprises two chapters where the author first establishes her theoretical perspective on gender (“Theorizing gender”), and then goes on to critically re-examine the research done within this area (“Gender and politeness”). In the initial theoretical chapter, Mills reviews the so-called ‘dominance’ and ‘difference’ models that have characterised many decades of research within feminist linguistics (see also, for example, Talbot 1998). Both models are positively and negatively evaluated in terms of their particular ways of looking at ‘women’s language’. While the ‘dominance’ model is highly valued because it made women conscious of the connotations of ‘powerlessness’ associated with ‘talking like a lady’ (Lakoff, 1975), the ‘difference’ model is appreciated because it re-evaluated this speech style, calling attention to the advantages of what are considered to be ‘feminine’ verbal skills such as the display of care, concern and sympathy for others (Coates, 1988; Holmes, 1995). However, the two approaches are also criticised to the extent that they both draw on stereotypical views of the language of white, middle-

class Anglo-American women to make generalisations about all women, and because of their essentialist view of the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’ as binary oppositions. Pursuing her critical approach, Mills argues for the performative view of gender, derived from Butler’s work (1993), which most language and gender studies are currently developing. In contrast to the ‘dominance’ and ‘difference’ approaches, the performative view clearly separates what are strong stereotypes of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ and what may be actual women’s and men’s linguistic behaviour, taking into account that individuals can reaffirm but also challenge these stereotypes, and that these negotiations are closely linked to the context. The author clearly summarises the key point of these approaches to gender, when she comments that “one can be a woman without necessarily considering oneself to be (or others considering one to be) feminine” (p. 188), and, by way of an example, she reviews recent studies that document the highly masculinised language (marked by swearing and directness) that many women currently use in the public sphere, challenging the notion that ‘women’s language’ is an ‘over-polite’ and ‘powerless’ speech style.

Once established a strong theoretical position on politeness on the one hand, and on gender on the other, the criticisms directed at Brown’s (1980, 1993) and Holmes’ (1995) analyses of politeness in the final chapter, are easy to predict since these studies apply Brown & Levinson’s model (1978, 1987) and make generalisations about all women’s linguistic behaviour. In this chapter, Mills interestingly comments that the relationship between women and polite behaviour is strong, because politeness is considered “a civilising force which mitigates the aggression of strangers and familiars towards one another and ideologically this civilising move is often associated with femininity” (p. 204), while masculinity is in opposition associated with directness and aggression. These highly stable associations represent, as the author rightly states, the epitome of stereotypical language behaviour for males and females in Western countries as white, working-class men (direct, assertive, impolite) and white, middle-class women (polite, deferent, ‘nice’ to others). In the following detailed review of Brown’s (1980, 1993) and Holmes’ (1995) studies, which commonly argue that ‘women are more polite’ than men, the author directs her criticisms to the characterisation that these studies make, on the basis of a certain group of women, of all women’s linguistic behaviour. Her most developed criticisms go to Holmes’ statistical analysis (1995) of women’s and men’s use of certain linguistic forms (pragmatic particles such as ‘I think’, ‘you know’, compliments, apologies, and so on), which concludes, establishing a marked gender polarisation, that women use these forms both as positive and negative politeness strategies because of their orientation to the affective function of language, while men use them primarily in their referential function. Mills criticizes Holmes’ interpretation of data, demonstrating that it is rather incoherent in certain cases and, in line with the theoretical conceptualisation of politeness developed in the previous chapters, stressing the necessity of taking into account the hearer’s

reception of the utterances: speech acts so strongly associated with women's talk in all-female groups such as compliments, for example, may be perceived as a flattery behaviour with manipulative goals or as a signal of envy, instead of being considered as manifestations of polite behaviour. As in the other chapters, the author clarifies her arguments by presenting the analysis of conversational extracts. It must be highlighted here the case of an excellent example, which I find specially illustrative of Mills' point in this book, where three women are at home just before lunch time. One of these women is a guest who has just given a gift to their friends as a signal of gratitude for their warm welcome. The analysis focuses on an exchange where the woman invited is apparently apologising for the poor quality and the lack of bright colours in the shells she gave as a present for their friends. During the extensive explanation that this woman provides of the reasons why she could not bring a better gift, the other women continuously intersperse her discourse with utterances of the type 'oh, that's lovely', 'thank you', and so on. This type of behaviour seems to echo the over-polite speech which stereotypically characterises women and which would be probably considered, within Holmes' approach, a clear display of the negative and positive politeness strategies which women supposedly often exploit. However, the responses that the participants provided later to Mills about their productions in this exchange are surprising, since they stated that with their continuous praising and thanking for the gift, they were merely attempting to finish the exchange to start having lunch. On the other hand, the extensive explanation of the woman invited regarding the poor quality of the gift was not perceived by these women as an apology and a manifestation of her polite character, but as something related to her habitual verbal style of talking too much. In this way, the example shows that it is the context (talk taking place just before lunch time; perception of the woman invited within this particular community of practice as too talkative; extensive explanations by this woman regarding the chosen gift) rather than the force of feminine stereotyping what made women behaving in this 'over-polite' way. Instead, if we apply the 'difference' perspective on gender developed in books such as Holmes' (1995), and an approach to politeness based on Brown and Levinson's paradigm (1978, 1987), the extract would constitute an excellent example of the 'over-polite' character of 'women's language'.

In this way, *Gender and politeness* tries to move research on women's and men's use of politeness from the so-called 'dominance' and 'difference' models that language and gender studies have followed during many decades, to the performative framework currently advocated by most researchers (see, for example, Bergvall, Bing & Freed, 1996; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997; Bucholtz, Liang & Sutton, 1999; Baron & Kotthoff, 2002). It is in fact rather surprising that the strong relationship between gender and politeness has been addressed up to now almost exclusively by studies which approach gender in a rather essentialist way, drawing on the epitome of stereotypical language behaviour for males and females in Western

countries as white, working-class men (direct, assertive, impolite, competitive, powerful, and so on) and white, middle-class women (polite, deferent, co-operative, emotional, powerless, and so on), to make generalisations about all women's and men's linguistic behaviour (as a notable exception Gardner-Chloros & Finnis, 2003). Thus, Mills' book is welcome due to her approach to women's and men's use of politeness from the perspective adopted by what is coming to be known as the Third Wave feminist linguistics (see Bucholtz, 1999; Kendall & Tannen, 2001). In contrast to the reproduction of gender stereotypes and to the excessive polarisation of the differences between female and male communicative patterns that the 'difference' model studies were promoting (see Johnson, 1997), this new performative view of gender offers a broader and more productive framework where we can analyse and appropriately interpret the different positions adopted by individuals in terms of the social construction of 'femininity' and 'masculinity', and the way these positions are inflected by other contextual factors such as power, class, race, and so on. As Mills states, language and gender research is currently marked by the development of 'punctual' analyses of the ways we are continuously 'doing gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) in our everyday interactions within different 'communities of practice' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; see also Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Pujolar, 2003); sometimes accommodating our behaviour to dominant gender stereotypes, sometimes challenging them and producing what Bucholtz (1999) calls 'bad examples'. In line with these recent perspectives, Mills argues for avoiding the establishment of stable oppositions between the sexes in terms of the use of politeness or impoliteness, according to what some recent studies in this area have already claimed (cf. Gardner-Chloros & Finnis, 2003). At the same time, the book may be also of interest for researchers working on politeness in general, as it offers a detailed critical re-examination of Brown and Levinson's model and establishes an alternative analytical framework. With the development of a dynamic conception of the relationship between gender and politeness on the one hand, and the establishment of a new, more discourse-based analytical perspective on politeness on the other, it is unquestionable that Mills' book should be seriously taken into account by future studies in the field. Empirical research would need now to reaffirm its clear advantages, but also to note the possible inconveniences of the theoretical framework on gender and politeness she is proposing.

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