Pragmatics in Academia: The Role of Gender and Power Relations in the Use of Implicatures

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"Waiting to see me?" asked Dr. Beebe. Was it an implicature or a speech act? Was the utterance intended as an invitation—*Come in*—or as a request for information—*Are you here to see me?* I stood up and followed Dr. Beebe into her office. This very first encounter ushered pragmatics into my life. It was also my first step in discovering many different aspects of interaction, and later on, it allowed me to go in my research where others feared to tread, so to speak. Doctor Beebe's passion for pragmatics, and her ability to ignite her students' desire to pursue questions relevant to their lives, has kept many of us in her camp. The findings that will be presented in this paper come from my first research study inspired by Dr. Beebe's class on pragmatics.

As the introductory example illustrates, implicatures frequently occur in daily conversations, and yet their use is often not fully understood. Generally speaking, inplicatures are used to hint, suggest, or avoid directness for various reasons. They seem to be in direct contrast to Grice's (1975) view that utterances need to be informative. Implicatures may purposely cloak direct information, so the hearer would need to infer what the message of the implicature was. According to Keenan (1976), implicatures can be used to withhold information or to allude to certain information, particularly in cases when doing the opposite would be "indiscrete, impolite, unethical, or a threat to one's honor and standing" (p. 70). Clearly, a speech situation will have an impact on the choice and frequency of implicatures, but so will other important social variables, such as gender and power relations. The size of the threat to one's standing or honor will depend on the social positions of the speaker and the hearer, and the amount of decision-making power they hold in the workplace or any other relationship.

The focus of the research on implicatures has primarily been in the area of the hearer's understanding of how meaning is conveyed by implicature (Clark & Lucy, 1975)—in other words, how the hearer infers the meaning, or so-called inferencing (Thomas, 1995). There has been a good deal of research looking into the relationship between speech acts (e.g., compliments giving) and gender, as well as between speech acts and hearer/speaker power relations. However, implicatures have not been fully examined through either the gender or power prism.

The original study was an attempt to examine the role of gender and power status in the use of implicatures. The naturally occurring data was collected by the participant-observant at a university setting. The procedures for transcribing *notebook data* "were used to provide the social context so crucial to understanding speech situations" (Beebe, 1994). The interlocutors were of the same social class and had similar educational backgrounds, but they all held different positions of power in the work place. (There were a total of 20 conversations with about 15 different interlocutors. The short excerpt presented below only includes two interlocutors.)

While there were several findings in the study, I will highlight one finding here: *intentional indirectness* (Thomas, 1995). The implicatures were used by a male interlocutor in a male-to-female interaction, with the implicature having a *downward flow*, that of a higher power holder directing implicatures at a person with lower rank or less decision-making power. Downward flow with status unequals (e.g., from higher-status or power holder to the lower one) was found to be

more common in studies on compliment giving (Wolfson & Manes, 1980) and it was found to be more common in this study as well.

The following excerpt illustrates a male-to-female interaction where the male interlocutor holds power. He is the director of a large program and has the final say in all decision making, from assigning courses to evaluating faculty and providing opportunities to work on projects. The female interlocutor is a new part-time faculty member. They are discussing her class as part of the post-observation protocol.

Excerpt 1: James is the director of the program; Ana is the adjunct lecturer

1 James: In the short time I was there, it seemed that **working on poetry was hard**.
2 Ana: I had those five poems connected.
3 James: **What was the pedagogy behind it**?
4 Ana: I always use a motive of poetry.
5 James: **You know what would be wonderful?** If you'd interweave poetry into writing.
6 Ana: I prefer to give them structure first.

In this interaction, the male power holder appeared to be trying to point out to the new lecturer that her teaching strategy needed some discussing and revising. In order to calculate the intended implicature, he used a couple of moves: (a) "working on poetry was hard", and (b) "What was the pedagogy behind it?" After these two building blocks, he finally used the intended utterance "You know what would be wonderful?" The utterance contained *would* as if it were a suggestion, but the status of the speaker may have indicated that the utterance was more likely a request for using a different teaching strategy than a suggestion.

In this study's context, intentional indirectness could be seen as a favored communication strategy, one could argue, since at work, indirectness may succeed where a direct approach would fail. The director of the program, who was the observer of the class, appeared to be intentionally indirect in his assessment of the class he observed. He could have used more direct utterances that are evaluative in nature (e.g., "Your class was not effective," or "Your strategy was not well chosen"). However, he did not do so. He chose to be indirect and to implicitly state that the class was not effective.

In addition, it is the male interlocutor who chose indirectness, whereas the female interlocutor did not. This is somewhat surprising. Based on the literature on gender and interaction, one would expect the female faculty member to be less direct. This is because women tend to be more agreeable and less adversarial (Wolfson & Manes, 1980). They are more inclined to avoid conflict and be cooperative, aiming for solidarity. Men, on the other hand, tend to be more direct. If one were to deduce from gender-based research, one would find the female interlocutor in this instance to be atypical in her responses since she was direct. Thus, it may not have been gender but power that ruled the utterance choices. Although it is hard to make generalizations based on such a small sample, it may not be unreasonable to stipulate that in some settings, power relations may override the gender variable. The findings from this study certainly need further research, but the beginnings of the study were inspired by the seminar on pragmatics and Dr. Beebe's lectures on Wolfson's research. It opened up a whole new area for me about how men and women talk in academic settings.

In conclusion, this first, small-scale study gave me the opportunity every student in linguistics dreams of—doing real work and collecting naturally-occurring data. It allowed me to

take Dr. Beebe's direction in approaching the data, and identify an issue to examine—an often overwhelming task for an aspiring scholar. It was an exciting beginning to working with spoken discourse.

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