POLITENESS STRATEGY AND MAXIM IN LIAR LIAR (1997):
A PRAGMATIC STUDY

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Abstrak

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BACKGROUND
In order to be accepted as a member of a communal group, one ought to follow certain social rules of behavior already existing within the group. The set of rules consists of choices made by individuals to maintain good social relations. The rules refer not only to what to do and what not to do when interacting with one another but also to what to say and what not to say. Here, the term politeness refers to both of the issues. When it comes to language use chosen to communicate, people will basically try to be as polite as possible since they realize that they will never be recognized as a good part of the community if they do otherwise. Likewise, they will never tolerate any verbal offense or impoliteness of others. Therefore, a number of strategies are employed with the aim of showing politeness. This goal is achieved by choosing appropriate linguistic expressions that demonstrate friendly attitude.

Actually, politeness strategy can be abundantly found in real-life every day conversation. People often use it in communication. However, since such research requires a real footage of the conversation and it often takes time to create it, taking samples from films as the object of analysis is a great alternative. Here, a film entitled Liar Liar (1997), a Hollywood box office movie starred by Jim Carrey, is chosen because it contains a number of politeness strategies.

The object of Analysis
Liar Liar, an American comedy movie directed by Tom Shadyac, tells about a few days in the life of a lawyer named Fletcher Reede (Jim Carrey). He is so career-oriented that
he will never hesitate to do what is necessary in order to ‘get one step higher in the ladder of success’ (Jim Carrey – Information, 2009). This includes altering the truth and manipulating facts (read: telling lies). Such habitual act of lying is not only done before a court of trial to defend his client, but also performed in informal office situations when he interacts with his colleagues. He is frequently seen as trying to get people’s sympathy by giving exaggerating as well as high-lifting comments or praise. The problem is that the comments or the praise is often not entirely true. The reason for doing this is merely because he wants to appear not only as an always-winning advocate who is able to gain considerable fortune but also as a friend at work who is popular for being very kind and friendly. He desires to be a noticeable part of his office community. Consequently, he strives to make anyone feel happy when they see him. However, things become completely different when he gets a 24-hour curse that makes him incapable of lying. He is unwillingly forced to tell the truth all the time; to speak whatever on his mind which is totally the opposite of what he has said all along. This paper illustrates which linguistic expressions chosen by Reede to show politeness before he gets the curse, compared to those after he gets it.

**Language and Politeness**

As a social being, human uses language to communicate and interact within their respective community. Language has become an integral part of a society that contributes significantly to the formation of, according to Chomsky, a mutually ‘comfortable social matrix’ (1996). This, as he later puts forward, is one of the two conventional uses of language, i.e. as a means of social relation. People utilize language because they feel the need to construct and strengthen social relations among individuals. The other common use of language has to do with self-expression. People make use of language simply to express themselves (what they feel emotionally) or to clarify their thoughts (what they think). These two functions of language are interconnected to each other. The social bond created among individuals in a certain social group highly depends on the language use chosen by each member of the society when they express their feelings and their thoughts linguistically. If there are social rules of behavior in terms of bodily movement, which are unique to each of particular communities, (such as always giving things to others with one’s right hand instead of their left one, or covering one’s mouth with either one or both of their hand palms every time they yawn in front of other people), to show a pleasant attitude and a sense of respect towards others, then social rules in terms of verbal expressions are existent as well. The latter, that has similar purpose with the former, is what politeness in pragmatics denotes. It refers to the choices made in language use in order to create linguistic expressions that give people space and show a friendly attitude to them (Cutting, 2002).

If politeness in verbal expressions is maintained, it will result in good social relations among individuals within a group of community. Brown and Levinson (1987) state that in order to enter into a successful social relationship, people have to show an awareness of the *face*, the public self-image, the sense of self, of the people that they address. Later on, they argue that it is a universally acknowledged characteristic beyond the barrier of language and culture that people are better off respecting each others’ expectations regarding self image, taking into account of their feelings, and avoiding face threatening acts (FTAs).

**Positive and Negative Politeness**

Conflicts among members of a communal group may occur due to their inability to save the face of people to whom they speak. They fail to choose appropriate linguistic expressions pleasant enough to be heard so that the hearer feels offended and loses their face. Basically, everyone has intention to respect others as well as having a desire to be appreciated by them. However, in certain circumstances face threatening acts (FTAs) cannot be avoided.
According to Cutting (2002), when it is not possible for speakers to evade FTAs, they can redress the threat by using either negative politeness strategy or positive politeness one. Negative politeness shows consideration for the hearers’ negative face, which refers to a situation in which the hearer needs to be independent and not be imposed by others. Meanwhile, having a positive face means the hearer needs ‘to be accepted by others and to be treated as a member of a group’ (Sutrisno, 2007).

Negative politeness shows a distant social relationship between interlocutors. When they are involved in a conversation, they can avoid imposition ‘by emphasizing the importance of others’ time and concern using apology, hesitation, or a question that gives them the opportunity to say no’ (Cutting, 2002). The wider the extent of option-offering to say ‘no’ is given by the speaker, the more polite the expression is. Here, the hearer is given a chance to response at his own will; to have freedom of making option. Another characteristic of negative politeness is typified by the degree of pessimism in the utterance. Brown and Levinson (1987) call this strategy ‘be pessimistic’. In contrast, positive politeness has an objective to demonstrate closeness and solidarity, an appeal to friendship, to make other people good, and to emphasize that both speakers have a common goal (Cutting, 2002). In this case, before asking, inviting, or offering something, speakers can open the conversation by claiming common ground (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This is done by knowing the addressee’s wants, needs and interests. Later, the information can be used as preliminary statements so that they will be motivated to response positively. It will be truly beneficial to the strategy of preventing a face threatening act to happen since the speaker demonstrates a high degree of solidarity towards the hearer.

Another common type of positive politeness is a strategy called pseudo-agreement. Here, the interlocutor seems to agree with what the speaker says by being cooperative, such as by not giving rise to argument, offering, promising and assuming mutual benefit or exchange (Cutting, 2002).

The Cooperative Principle

When people interact with one another in their day-to-day routine and manage themselves to turn out well in maintaining a social bond, it does not mean that they have no problems potential enough to become conflicts. Merely, it is because they are actually surrounded by a set of social rules to which they are subject. Each of them is either fully or partially equipped with adequate information regarding what to do and what not to do in everyday life, especially when it comes to doing activities that will affect others. In short, they follow the same principles. For instance, according to Dardjowidjodjo (2003), it is barely possible to imagine what will happen on the street if every driver does not agree to abide by the principles; e.g. they do not drive along the left side of the road all the time, give signals before turning left, and stop behind the white line as soon as the traffic light turns red. It is because they are fully aware of the principles and they obey them accordingly that the traffic can run smoothly. In language use, such principles are called the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975).

What is communicated by each interlocutor when they have a conversation must be effectively transmitted and received so that miscommunication will never occur afterwards. In order to do this, they need to make sure that the collaborative rules of conversation (the Cooperative Principle) which are divided and elaborated into four maxims are followed appropriately. The first maxim is quantity, which controls the amount of information that needs to be delivered in a conversation. In communication, interlocutors should make contribution as informative as possible, but not too informative more than what is required or too less information than it is needed. Too less information will cause misunderstanding. Too much information will make the contribution irrelevant. The second maxim is quality.
Yule (1996) argues that in order not to violate this maxim, one should avoid telling what is not considered to be true. False information and lacking-evident contribution must not be said since it can be misleading and eventually disrupt the intended purpose of communication. Every informational exchange ought to be based on truth that corresponds to reality. The third maxim is relation. Whenever a conversation occurs, no matter how trivial it is, it must have a purpose. What is said following the previously delivered piece of information must be relevant with the goal of the conversation itself. If one intends to describe a thing, then he has to focus on telling how the thing looks like without making unnecessary comments or overlapping digression. Cutting (2002) says that an interlocutor may explicitly or implicitly indicate that their remarks have relevance to the conversation. The last maxim is manner. This fourth maxim requires every interlocutor to be brief, unequivocal, and orderly in communicating their thoughts. The contribution must be concise, presented in a logical sequence, and clear without ambiguity and obscurity.

Obviously, the afore-mentioned principles propose idealistic ways of making communication. In reality, people do not always follow the rules and they tend to violate the four maxims. However, such violation does not always result in negative effects. Interlocutors can intentionally violate the maxims in order to make comical effects, such as in verbal jokes, expect the hearers to get the implied meaning of things that may not be said directly, or avoid telling the truth that will only sound rude and offensive (preferring to tell a white lie). When a speaker does that, it means that they are ‘flouting’ the maxims (Cutting, 2002). Since there are four sub-principles of cooperative communication, flouting is also of four kinds, according to the maxim in which it occurs. In relation to politeness, flouting one or more of the maxims may serve as a strategy employed to minimize FTAs.

Politeness Maxims

Maxims are also existent in politeness strategy. Leech (1983) made a list of six maxims, i.e. tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Tact maxim revolves around the hearer. Its goal is to ‘minimize cost to other’, which corresponds to Brown and Levinson’s negative politeness strategy of making imposition as minimum as possible, and ‘maximize benefit to other’, which is similar to the positive politeness strategy of attending the hearer’s interests, wants, and needs (Cutting, 2002). The tact maxim intends to make the hearer feel that their time and concerns are of vital importance and to indicate that the speaker is aware that the hearer is always busy and in the middle of something. This is accomplished by showing apology, hesitation, or question before asking, inviting, or offering something. It also aims to show a certain degree of solidarity that makes the hearer feel that he is liked and accepted as a part of a group. Generosity maxim, conversely, concentrates on the speaker rather than the hearer. Its purpose is achieved by minimizing benefit and maximizing cost to the speaker. Here, the speaker tries to convince the hearer that if he is willing to do what the speaker says, he will certainly get benefit from doing that, and all the cost only lies on the back of the speaker. The third and fourth politeness maxims are approbation and modesty, whose strategy resembles that of positive politeness. The former, which signifies a verbal expression used to minimize dispraise of others and maximize praise of others, is attained by means of avoiding disagreement. The latter, which denotes a linguistic act in order to maximize dispraise of self and minimize praise of self, is completed through ‘making other people feel good by showing solidarity’ (Cutting, 2002). Modesty is also identified with the occurrence of self-belittling remarks that precede any forms of directive speech act. The last two maxims are agreement and sympathy. Agreement maxim functions as a means to lessen FTAs by seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement. Meanwhile, sympathy maxim serves as a way of showing empathy towards others. This includes congratulating, commiserating and expressing condolences.
Data Analysis

The relevant linguistic expressions analyzed in this paper are only a few among so many. There are perhaps some of them which are overlooked. What are exemplified here are just some examples of politeness strategy and politeness maxim that occur in the conversations.

Datum 1a

Woman : Hi. Mr. Reede.
Mr. Reede : Hey..! Did you do something to your hair?
Woman : It’s a bit extreme, isn’t it?
Mr. Reede : No. I mean that’s the things nowadays, right?
Woman : He said it would accent my facial feature.
Mr. Reede : Well, that’s what it does. It completely accents your facial feature.

The situational context of the conversation is when Reede has just entered his office floor. He is immediately welcome by a female receptionist at the front desk. The woman has just got new-but-unusually ugly hair style and yet, she seems to look forward to Reede’s positive comments. Reede is a little bit surprised. So, he chooses to ask an unnecessary question; a question to which the answer he has already known. Yet, the woman does not give a response that resembles an answer. She in fact raises another question. From the point of view of conversational analysis, this is not an ‘adjacency pair’ since the second part does not follow on from the first part; a question which is not followed by an answer (Cutting 2002). Here, she has also violated the cooperative principle by not giving relevant and required information. This is the violation of maxims of manner and quantity. Nonetheless, the woman’s utterance also contains negative politeness strategy by being pessimistic and offering Reede greater chance to say ‘no’. It implies that she herself realizes that her hair style is beyond what is normal and it is all right if Reede thinks so too. With this linguistic expression, she uses the politeness maxim of modesty by minimizing praise of self. Meanwhile, Reede demonstrates positive politeness strategy of seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement. He is able to find out what she wants to hear from him, and thus he tries to be as cooperative as possible. He even exaggerates his agreement by telling her that the hair style ‘completely accents [her] facial feature’. He uses pseudo-agreement to make the woman feel good and also to show a sense of solidarity and friendship. He knows that the woman might have tried hard to look that way and to get his attention, and what she expects at the moment is some positive opinion and appreciation. Therefore, he prefers telling a face-saving white lie although it actually flouts the maxim of quality. Here, the politeness maxim used is that of agreement.

The linguistic evident showing that Reede actually fakes his agreement lies on the following conversation after he gets the curse.

Datum 1b

Woman : Hi. Mr. Reede. Like the new dress?
Mr. Reede : Whatever takes the focus off your head.

When Reede enters his office floor the next day, once again he is welcome by the same woman. Only this time, she does not ask for an opinion about her hair. She wishes for another positive comment about the check-patterned dress she is wearing. However, Reede’s remark is completely the opposite of his previous one. Since he is under the control of the curse, he is incapable of lying anymore and thus reveals what he actually thinks about her hair. His comment above implies that there is a part of the woman’s head which is very unpleasant to look at and she needs to take people’s attention away from it. Reede’s
comment also shows that he could not care less about what the woman looks like. Here, Reede does not only violate the maxim of quantity by giving too much information more than what the woman expects, and the maxim of relation since his answer is irrelevant with the question, he also produces an utterance that is absolutely face-threatening. The maxim of quality is present, but politeness maxim is absent in this comment.

Datum 2a
Pete : Hey, Fletcher.
Mr. Reede : Hey, Pete. Are you losing a little weight?
Pete : I don’t know. Maybe.
Mr. Reede : Looks and personality. A double threat guy.

The conversation above happens soon after Reede meets the front desk woman before he gets the curse. Pete, his overweight colleague, greets him first. Instead of only greeting Pete in return, Reede tries to be more polite by asking a question which is closer to a compliment. Although Pete replies that he is not sure whether he really has lost weight or not, which also signifies that he is not in a weight reduction program because if he were he would know it for sure, Reede continues to praise Pete more and more. He even embellishes it by saying that Pete has both of the two appealing qualities; ‘look and personality’. This shows that Reede does not hesitate to express his admiration towards others in order to be accepted and liked by them. He maximizes his praise of others. In this case, he uses positive politeness strategy, with the politeness maxim of approbation.

But then again, what Reede says before he gets the curse is not something trustworthy. He has violated the maxim of quality because of giving false and lacking-evident comments. He does not know for sure whether Pete is really losing weight or not, but he makes an impression as if he were. He knows that Pete is too much overweight and people in general will find him unattractive, but still he tries to convince him that Pete is appealing in both physical and personal side. The compelling proof of the violation can be seen from the conversation below.

Datum 2b
Pete : What’s up, Fletcher?
Mr. Reede : Your cholesterol, Fatty. Dead man walking.

Here, Pete unfortunately meets Reede again after Reede gets the curse. As usual, Pete is the first one who tries to be polite by greeting him first. This indicates that Reede’s habitual act of giving praise to others makes him a likeable figure in his office. It is as if everybody in the office wanted to greet him first, including Pete. Only this time Reede does not return Pete’s politeness, let alone praise him with high-lifting admiration. While Pete actually wants to know how he is doing at the moment by saying ‘What’s up?’, Reede deliberately interprets the question literally by replying that the only thing ‘which is up’ is Pete’s cholesterol. In fact, he calls him ‘Fatty’, a nickname that every overweight person will find it rude and offensive. Moreover, he overstates that Pete’s health is so endangered that it can be figuratively assumed he is already dead. From the point of view of the cooperative principle, the conversation does not show any flouting towards the maxim of relation. The answer is somehow relevant with the question. Yet, it provides more information than what is required. So, it violates the maxim of quantity. Once again, after he gets the curse, politeness maxim is entirely absent in Reede’s utterance. What he says to Pete is an example of FTA.

Datum 3
Mr. Reede : Your Honor, would the court be willing to grant me a short bathroom break?
Judge : Can’t it wait?
Mr. reede : Yes it can. But I’ve heard that if you hold it can damage the prostate gland
making it very difficult to get an erection, even become arouse.
Judge : Is that true?
Mr. Reede : It has to be.
Judge : Well, in that case I better take a little break myself. But you get back here soon
so we can finish this.

The conversation above takes place in a court when Reede has already been cursed. There is no scene in the film that shows any conversations happening inside the court before then. In the situation, Reede is stressed out since he has no idea how to represent his client triumphantly without his ability to tell lies. When the judge asks him to proceed, he finally finds a way out by pretending that he has to go to the rest room as soon as possible. The linguistic expression he chooses is that of negative politeness strategy. Reede tries to be as polite as possible by emphasizing his distant relationship with the judge by addressing him ‘Your Honor’ and uses very formal expression in stating what he asks for to minimize imposition. The expression shows Reede’s concern regarding the importance of time that the court has, since it has been adjourned once before the above conversation takes place. Therefore, Reede clearly states that he only needs to interrupt the trial for a ‘short’ period of time. However, this strategy does not work out well. The judge’s indirect reply implies that he cannot grant what Reede asks for since it is necessary to finish the court of trial right away. When the judge asks whether Reede can hold his need to go the rest room or not, he actually says ‘yes’ against his will, since he is incapable of saying otherwise. Even though this strategy of avoiding disagreement is unintentional, it can be said that he uses positive politeness of pseudo-agreement; it seems that he is being cooperative by not giving rise to argument. But then he explains the bad effect that will happen if the judge insists not to let him take a break—the bad effect which could also happen to the judge if he does not take a break himself. In this case, it shows that the linguistic expressions that Reede chooses contain not only positive politeness strategy, but also two politeness maxims all at once; tact maxim that ‘minimizes cost to other and maximizes benefit to other’, as well as agreement maxim that ‘minimizes disagreement between self and other and maximizes agreement between self and other’ (Leech, 1983). Because of this, the judge finally grants his wish to take a break.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic expressions chosen by people when interacting socially highly depend on their intention and purpose. The illustration above shows how someone may try hard to maintain good social relations with others by selecting a number of politeness strategies, even though they sometimes violate the cooperative principle. In Liar Liar, Reede strives to be accepted and liked by his colleagues by not telling them the truth. He prefers to avoid disagreement and tell white lies in order to show politeness. He mainly chooses positive politeness that shows a sense of friendship and solidarity, and politeness maxim of agreement that demonstrates cooperativeness. If only he were able to manage that way, he would remain a likeable figure in his office. It is ironic indeed. But believe it or not, this sort of thing may not only happen in films. So, what types of politeness that your colleagues or even you usually choose?

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