How Socially Sensitive Questions are Asked and Answered: 
A Pragmatic Act

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Abstract

How socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered between people at different stages of friendship (or closeness) is an important and necessary study in the field of face and face threatening acts (FTAs). This paper largely focuses on how these types of questions are asked and answered between close friends by examining previous research on face and (im)politeness and analysing two face-to-face interactions. By examining research conducted on the closely-related field of face and (im)politeness, it can be concluded that socially-sensitive questions are nearly always only asked in the presence of close friends, where the likelihood of losing face and an FTA occurring is significantly reduced.

1. Introduction

There are a number of potential problems that arise when one asks or answers a socially-sensitive question. Many of these usually occur when the participants do not know each other very well. However, issues can also arise when socially-sensitive topics are brought up between close friends. Some of the most common problems are related to face and face threatening acts (FTAs).

The aim of this paper is to examine how socially sensitive questions are asked and answered during face-to-face conversations. This will occur through a review of some of the many research related to face and (im)politeness, and the analysis of two extracts. The analysis will largely focus on the broad topics of face, and (im)politeness in order to illustrate how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered.

2. Literature Review

While previous research into this particular topic has never been completed, there have been many research papers on the extensive topics of face, and (im)politeness. These topics are both related to the pragmatic act of how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered. The author has focused on a small number of researches that have been published by selected linguists and the following review is by no means exhaustive.

Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication 3, 2 (2010), 95-103
2.1 Face

According to Lee & Renzetti (1990:511), any topic has the ability to be considered “sensitive”. This ability is dependent on the relationship between the participants (Arundale, 2006) and the culture(s) they have been exposed to in life (Culpeper, in press:2). Usually, one would not bring up an extremely sensitive topic unless they know the other participant(s) very well and are close friends. Arundale (2006:203) notes that interpersonal relationships are characterised by:

- openness (sharing), and closedness with one’s partner,
- certainty about the relationship, and uncertainty about it, and
- connectedness with the other, and separateness from them.

If a particularly sensitive topic is introduced into a conversation between acquaintances, there would be a higher risk of an FTA occurring for the participants. Having said that, an FTA can occur no matter how close the participants are. This is because an FTA is “any action that impinges to some degree upon a person’s face” (Culpeper, in press:7-8). What usually constitutes an FTA depends on whether it is the hearer’s or speaker’s face that is threatened (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press). Actions that threaten the hearer’s face usually include “orders, requests, threats, criticism, contradictions, and the mention of taboo topics” (Culpeper, in press:8), whilst actions that threaten the speaker’s face usually consist of “expressing thanks, unwilling promises and offers, apologies, the breakdown of physical control over one’s body, and confessions”. This paper will mainly focus on the former, that is, actions that threaten the hearer’s face.

Positive and negative output strategies are commonly used in order to reduce the possibility of an FTA (Culpeper, in press:10). Some such strategies (not exhaustive), given by Brown & Levinson (1987) are listed below (in Culpeper, in press:10-11):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Politeness Output Strategies (PPOs)</th>
<th>Negative Politeness Output Strategies (NPOs)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Avoid disagreement (token agreement, white lies, hedging opinions)</td>
<td>• Question, hedge (address hedges to illocutionary force, Grice’s Maxims, politeness strategies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Joke that utilise shared knowledge to put the hearer at ease</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Give (or ask for) reasons</td>
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2.2 (Im)politeness

Each participant’s perspective on (im)politeness varies according to their individual cultural upbringing and relationship between each other (Arundale, 2006; Culpeper, in press). What is considered impolite in one country or culture may be considered polite in another, and vice versa. Due to this fact, there are many different definitions and approaches to politeness (Culpeper, in press). A pragmatic approach, employed by Leech (1983:82) claims that there is a Politeness Principle, and the role of this principle is “to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place”. This is further illustrated by Brown & Levinson (1987 in Culpeper, in press:8) who claim that “in general, people cooperate (and assume each other’s cooperation) in maintaining face”. In general, face, especially FTAs, and (im)politeness are strongly linked because impoliteness can result in FTAs and these possible FTAs can be resolved by undertaking one of the many politeness strategies (Culpeper, in press).

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Extract One

In extract (1) below, the two participants are close friends, catching up in the campus grounds before a class starts. Jane (a pseudonym) is eighteen years old, while Claire (again a pseudonym) is nineteen. Both participants are in their second year of university and are both native Australian English speakers. This extract is from a much longer conversation that occurred in the one sitting.

The extract below is an example of how Jane asks a fairly sensitive question and how Claire acknowledges and answers it.

(1) GCSAusE29: 4:22 - 5:15

1 Claire: I remember once: (0.4) u:m:, (1.1) like (1.0) grade one or t:wo, (0.5) mum driving us to school in Sydney, (0.4) and there being (0.3) like a huntsman or something on the roof;

2 Jane: °mhm°=

3 Claire: =and then it- it would crawl under the carpet that was li[ning the roof,]

4 Jane: [°oh yep° ]

5 Claire: ↑ (hh)I(hh) was like ( )

6 Claire: °(9.2)
Jane: [Yuk ] um (.) I can’t (0.6) °mmm°
Claire: [·hhh]
(Clare: I can’t- huntsmans I can’t st[and.]
Jane: [I ca]n’t deal with
them they’re too bi:g a[nd s]cary and ugh::
Claire: [Yeah]
(Jane: mmm um: (1.5) are you superstitious?
(Claire: yes and no:. there’s a >bloo:dy bird<
(hh)ther(hh)e. Jane: Hhhhh
Claire: °ye[ls-]
Jane: *[“h]ow small is it, it’s the smallest ibis
I’ve ever seen°
(Claire: <why::>.
Jane: “um: well beca:se° (1.7) I think I’m >kinda like
yes and no like you know some things I’ll believe
in and then other things I’m just like
nye:< h[h ]=
Claire: °ye [ah: ]
Jane: =[you kno]w like
(1.7)
Claire: I think,
(2.2)
Jane: °but u[m:]*
Claire: °li]ke if you mean like (0.5) u:m (1.3)
for instance walking under a: (1.0) >a
[sign or something< I’m]=
Jane: [hh yeah that’s (just) stupid ye-]
Claire: =not super(hh)stitious bu- and like the black
and walking under a ladder and that sorta
thing,
(0.3)
Jane: °<d’you believe in ghosts°?
(2.5)
Claire: not really.
(.)
Jane: °well see (.) I’m the- sorta the same right?
(0.5)
anyway° (1.9) I have come to the conclusion
Line 22 in extract (1), Jane asks Claire if she is superstitious. Initially, this looks to be the primary sensitive type question. However, if we look at line 49, we see that the question in line 22 has been used as a Pre-First Pair Part (FPPpre) to the Base-First Pair Part (FPPb) (Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Given this, the abrupt change in topic (line 22), and the fact that the introduction of any sensitive type topic into a conversation has the ability to result in an FTA, line 22 can be referred to as a hedging question to ascertain, in this instance, Claire’s belief or possible response to the main question in line 49. Claire’s initial response (line 24) to this possible FTA is to avoid disagreement by hedging her opinion (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11). This reaction can thus be considered a dispreferred Second Pair Part (SPP) (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008:46-47; Pomerantz, 1984:64; Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Claire then follows this response with another PPOS in line 31 by asking “why” and thus asking for a reason behind the question in line 22 (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press). Jane’s reaction to this politeness strategy is, initially, hesitation (line 32 - “um well”), however she continues, after 1.7 seconds, with her thoughts and beliefs on superstition (lines 32-35). An important thing to notice here is, in comparison to her other speech, she rushes through these thoughts and beliefs (indicated by the > and <). At this point, it seems as though the roles have changed between the participants. Jane answers Claire’s counter question (line 31) as though Claire was the one who initiated the possible FTA. By hesitating and then rushing through her own thoughts and beliefs, Jane utilises the same PPOSs of avoiding disagreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11) that Claire used in line 24. Amazingly, as Jane utilises this politeness strategy, she also performs another PPOS, namely putting Claire at ease by putting forth her (Jane’s) own ideas on the matter (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:11-12). Claire accepts this, and expands her initial response (line 24) by providing more information in lines 42-44 and 46-47. Both of the participants make use of the PPOS of putting Claire at ease, as seen by the laughing in lines 45 and 46 (indicated by the “hh”) and Jane’s teasing (or joking) in line 45 (Brown & Levinson, 1987 in Culpeper, in press:10-11).

From this extract, we can conclude that sensitive topics and questions are, in this case, brought into the conversation rather abruptly, as opposed to a naturally flowing conversation and topic change. We can also suggest that these types of topics can be initiated through the use of hedging questions, as in the use of pre-invitations, to ascertain how the FPPb will be received to avoid the possibility of an FTA (Schegloff, 2007a:13-14, 2007b:29-31). The decision to continue with the sensitive topic is dependent on how the FPPpre is received, and establishing
whether the face of both participants would be maintained (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60-61 in Culpeper, in press:8; Schegloff, 2007a:13-14). Once the topic is continued (in this case), politeness strategies are used, mainly positive, in order for both participants to save face.

3.2 Extract Two

The 4 participants involved in extract (2) below are young native speakers of Australian English. The main participants involved in this extract are H, L, and D. The extract is based on what happened during an argument that H had with her boss over the phone. L and D are trying to get her to tell them what happened but H is, initially, not interested in answering their questions.

(2) GCSAusE19: 0:00 - 0:31

1  ((noises coming from kitchen throughout recording))
2  L: s:o what are you doin?
3     (1.2)
4  H: °i don’t know.°
5     (0.9)
6  L: you don’t kno:w
7     (3.5)
8  H: ((clears throat))
9  D: s:o what hap pened?
10    (1.3)
11  H: °a lot of stuff°
12     (0.5)
13  M: sounds like she’s being a righ:t-
14     (0.9)
15  H: ↑Bitch:
16  M: Pain in the butt.
17     (2.5)
18  M: u:mm
19     (1.9)
20  H: >what happened is I told shirl I couldn’t work today n she
21     forgot bout it n blamed it on ↑Me<
22     (0.6)
23  D: mmm.
24  H: <parently didn’t happen: it’s my word against Hers
25     (0.7) so
26     she’s obviously righ:t [(0.9)] Never HAPpened it’s all
27     (0.9)
28  D: [·hhh ]
29  H: in my hea:d.
30     (1.3)
31     (McLeod, 2010)
In this extract, the sensitive topic has nothing to do with a particular belief, as in (1), but is still considered sensitive due to H’s initial refusal in explaining what transpired with her boss during the telephone interaction. Originally, L asks her (H) “so what are you doing?” (line 2) and receives a dispreferred response (line 4), indicated by the pause in line 3 (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008:47) and the softer tone of voice (shown by ‘). We can also assume that H’s response is dispreferred because of the pause in line 5. This pause seems to indicate that L was waiting for H to elaborate on her “I don’t know” response (line 4). Not satisfied with H’s response in line 4, D asks her “so what happened?” (line 9) which is a more direct question that requires a more specific response. Even so, H again provides a dispreferred response (line 11) by pausing (line 10) and using a softer tone of voice. It is not until line 20 that H expands on her response in line 11. This expansion, as in (1), seems to be rushed (indicated by the > and <), in comparison to H’s other responses. This may suggest that she is reluctant to talk about what happened because she lost face during the argument with her boss.

This extract shows us how interpersonal relationships play an important role in how sensitive questions are asked and answered. It is evident that L and D are close with H and are indicating to her that they want to know what happened. It is this connectedness (Arundale, 2006:203), or closeness, that determines how questions, that can be considered sensitive for any reason, are asked and answered. If these participants had not been close, the repetition of questions (lines 2 and 9) and H’s unreceptive responses (lines 4 and 11) to them, that initially indicate that she does not want to talk about it, could have turned into an FTA for L and D. Given that it is of “mutual interest for interactants to cooperate by supporting each other’s face” (Brown & Levinson, 1987:60-61 in Culpeper, in press:8), this topic, usually, would not have been continued after H’s initial response (line 4) if they were not close friends.

4. The Process of Asking and Answering Socially-Sensitive Questions

From the analysis of the two extracts, we can make assumptions about the process that underpins the asking and answering of socially-sensitive questions. Because only a small number of extracts have been analysed, the following assumptions are by no means concrete and further analysis would be required.

4.1 The Assumption - Asking

Given the results of the analysis, we can determine that socially-sensitive questions are, usually, only ever asked in the presence of person(s) that are close to the speaker. This is due to the vulnerability of face (Brown & Levinson, 1987:61 in Culpeper, in press:8) and the larger threat of an FTA occurring between the participants if they have only just meet or are merely acquaintances, as opposed to if they are close friends.

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One can also say that sensitive topics are generally introduced into the conversation rather abruptly by initially using a hedging question to ascertain how the topic will be received, as in (1). However, this is by no means the only way that sensitive topics can be introduced into conversations, and thus would require further research and analysis.

4.2 The Assumption - Answering

In answering socially-sensitive questions, we can conclude from the results of the analysis, that there is a specific method usually, undertaken by the participant who is called upon to answer the question. This method involves providing an initial dispreferred response and then, expanding that response later in the conversation. This expansion, as in (1), can be assumed to occur because the threat of losing face has been reduced by Jane expressing her beliefs before Claire exposes her own (lines 32-35).

5. Conclusion

The way in which socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered largely depends on the closeness of the relationship between participants. This in turn determines whether the topic will be considered (im)polite and whether there is a substantial risk of an FTA occurring. The dependence upon the closeness of the individual relationship between participants to how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered is demonstrated by the two extracts examined in this paper. However, due to the limited data that has been analysed, the author would not be able to conclude that socially-sensitive topics are never introduced in the presence of acquaintances or others with different degrees of familial relationships. This paper, as the author has explained earlier, only provides a brief look into how socially-sensitive questions are asked and answered. Further research and analysis would be required to confirm (or even perhaps, disprove) the assumptions that the author has drawn.

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