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## **POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN THE INTERVIEW WITH MICHELLE OBAMA**

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### **Abstract**

The current paper aims at studying the strategies of positive and negative politeness, as well as at observing the compliance with these strategies in the interview of the radio host Tom Joyner with Michelle Obama. The goal is to compare the employment of positive and negative politeness strategies by the interviewers and the interviewee via conversational analysis, correlating the choice of the strategies with the desired effect that the participants of the interview planned to achieve. Theoretically, the overview of several concepts, such as face, face-threatening acts and the types of politeness is performed. Empirically, the quantitative research shows that positive politeness strategies are used more often than negative politeness strategies, both by the interviewers and interviewee. The goal of the interlocutors is to have a friendly atmosphere, but it was done for different purposes. The interviewers used positive politeness strategies in order to make the interview more successful and lively, as any person would feel comfortable and open if the atmosphere is amicable. However, the choice of positive politeness strategies by Michelle Obama can be explained by her wish to have a positive and friendly image, which can influence the audience, who are also possible voters. Michelle Obama's choice of strategies is believed to serve for intensifying interest and sympathy of the listeners, as well as for the purposes of unifying her audience. The paper highlights the pragmatic power of language, stressing the role that it plays in politics via creating a friendly image that would have a positive effect on the audience, thus helping to reveal the 'hidden' information, which influences our minds and opinions.

**KEYWORDS:** positive politeness, negative politeness, strategies, interview, politics, conversational analysis.

### **1. Introduction.**

The **theme** of the present paper is politeness strategies that are used in Tom Joyner's interview with Michelle Obama. Politeness is one of the most important aspects of communication. Disregarding the rules of politeness leads to unsuccessful and unsatisfactory interaction, as it violates the socio-cultural norms of society. Politeness is equally important for communication within one culture and for cross-cultural communication, according to Spenser-Oatey<sup>2</sup>. There are two major theoretical frameworks related to politeness. As discussed in the article by Moore<sup>3</sup>, the first one consists of a series of politeness maxims proposed by Geoff Leech. However, this paper deals with the framework, discussed in the seminal work by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson<sup>4</sup>, described by Moore<sup>5</sup> as 'the most

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<sup>2</sup> Spenser-Oatey 2000

<sup>3</sup> Moore 2001

<sup>4</sup> Brown and Levinson 2000

thorough treatment of the concept of politeness'. According to Kitamura<sup>6</sup>, this is 'a theory that has generated quite a degree of controversy; although widely acknowledged in the literature, it has also attracted considerable criticism (eg Matsumoto, 1988; Ide, 1989)'.

The **goal** of the paper is to examine the employment of positive and negative politeness strategies in the interview with Michelle Obama, which conducted during the radio show '*The Tom Joyner Morning Show*', on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 2010<sup>7</sup>. There were two interviewers, namely, the radio host Tom Joyner and Sybil Wilkes (who almost did not participate), and the interviewee was the First Lady of the USA, Michelle Obama. In order to reach the goal, several objectives need to be fulfilled. The **objectives** of the present study are:

1. to perform the theoretical study of the concept of politeness by Brown and Levinson;
2. to discuss positive and negative politeness strategies;
3. to analyse the interview according to positive and negative politeness;
4. to compare the results on the employment of positive and negative politeness strategies;
5. to draw the relevant conclusions.

The research data is acquired through conversational analysis. The **research questions** of the article are as follows:

1. Which politeness strategies are more widespread in the interview with Michelle Obama?
2. What effect is achieved?

The article consists of two major parts, the first one containing the theoretical discussion of the subject matter, and the second one describing on the empirical analysis of politeness strategies in the interview with Michelle Obama.

## 2. Background and motivations. Positive and Negative Politeness.

Mesthrie<sup>8</sup> claims that face is person's public self-image. Seiwald<sup>9</sup> quotes Brown and Levinson, stating that face is 'something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction'. There are two aspects of face: positive face and negative face. As described by Meyerhoff<sup>10</sup>, 'whether we consider a strategy polite or impolite depends on how much attention or what kind of attention a speaker pays to their own or their addressee's face wants'. Seiwald<sup>11</sup> claims that positive face means that 'a speaker's goals in a conversation have to be accepted by or even desirable to other speakers in order to fulfil positive face wants'. In short, positive face is desire to be liked and admired. Negative face is wish 'not to be imposed by the others' (Mesthrie 2000, 189). Seiwald<sup>12</sup> quotes Verschueren, stating that 'negative face [...] highlights a person's independence and possibility to act on one's own'. Thus, the concept of

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<sup>5</sup> Moore 2001

<sup>6</sup> Kitamura 2000

<sup>7</sup> *Transcript of the TJMS' Interview with Michelle Obama* 2010

<sup>8</sup> Mesthrie 2000, 189

<sup>9</sup> Seiwald 1997, 4

<sup>10</sup> Meyerhoff 2006, 84

<sup>11</sup> Seiwald 1997, 5

<sup>12</sup> Seiwald 1997, 5

freedom is significant for negative face. Consequently, both aspects of face are important for the development of interaction.

Mesthrie<sup>13</sup> states that positive politeness involves the expression of approval and friendliness. It is close to friendly and even joking behaviour. Valor<sup>14</sup> claims that the function of positive politeness strategies is to soften the face-threatening act by establishing solidarity. According to Brown and Levinson<sup>15</sup> 2000, 101-130, the strategies of positive politeness are as follows: *Notice of aspects of hearer's (H) condition; Exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with S); Intensify interest to H; Using in-group identifying markers; Seek agreement; Avoid disagreement; Presuppose, raise, assert common ground; Jokes; Assert presuppose of S's knowledge or concern for H's wants; Offer, promise; Be optimistic; Include both S and H in the activity; Give or ask for reasons; Assume or assert reciprocity; Give gifts to H (goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation)*. Positive politeness strategies are aimed at making the hearer feel comfortable and confident, as well as be satisfied with the conversation.

Negative politeness, as mentioned by Mesthrie<sup>16</sup>, involves 'not imposing on others or threatening their face'. Negative politeness stresses the distance between the speaker and the hearer (opposite to positive politeness). It is the kernel of respectful behaviour. Meyerhoff<sup>17</sup> claims that 'negative politeness strategies [...] attend to the addressee's negative face wants, that is, to their desire to be left alone to pursue their own actions or interests unimpeded'. Brown and Levinson<sup>18</sup> provide the following negative politeness strategies: *Be conventionally indirect; Questions, Hedges; Be pessimistic; Minimise the imposition; Give deference; Apologise; Impersonalise S and H; State the FTA as a general rule; Nominalise*. There strategies are aimed at showing respect and formality, indirectness and absence of disturbance.

Cross-cultural differences are connected to politeness strategies. According to the *Negative Politeness*<sup>19</sup>, 'one of the cultural differences between the USA and Great Britain is the English preference for "negative politeness" (showing respect), compared to the American style "positive politeness" (showing solidarity, claiming common ground, "we are in the same team" attitude)'. Americans tend to demonstrate approval and friendliness, while the English try to mitigate the distraction. Therefore, selected politeness strategies can illustrate some general pragmatic rules in a society.

### 3. Methodology.

The research method selected for the current study is conversation analysis. Hutchby and Wooffitt<sup>20</sup> define conversation analysis as 'the systematic analysis of the talk produced in everyday situations of human interactions: talk-in interactions'. Kvale and Flick<sup>21</sup> claim that

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<sup>13</sup> Mesthrie 2000, 189

<sup>14</sup> Valor 2000, 57

<sup>15</sup> Brown and Lewinson 2000, 101-131

<sup>16</sup> Mesthrie 2000, 189

<sup>17</sup> Meyerhoff 2006, 86

<sup>18</sup> Brown and Levinson 2000, 130-196

<sup>19</sup> *Negative Politeness* 2011

<sup>20</sup> Hutchby and Wooffitt 2008, 11

<sup>21</sup> Kvale and Flick 2007, 111

‘conversational analysis implies a pragmatic theory of language, it is about what words and sentences do; meaning of a statement is the role it plays in a specific social practice’. The data of the research was Tom Joyner’s interview with Michelle Obama, which conducted during the radio show ‘*The Tom Joyner Morning Show*’, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October<sup>22</sup>. Nunan<sup>23</sup> and Dörnyei<sup>24</sup> divide interviews into *unstructured* (determined by the individual responses centered around the topic rather than by concrete controlled agenda of the interviewer), *semi-structured* (during which the interviewer focuses on the selected theme, however, lacks the list of questions) and *structured* (constructed by the responses to the concrete questions that the interviewer poses). The interview under analysis belongs to the category of semi-structured interviews, as the general theme of the interview is connected with elections, however, it is conducted in a natural and lively way, but not as a question-and-answer session.

The procedure of the research includes analyzing the transcript of the interview, revealing the positive and negative politeness strategies that are prevailing and drawing relevant conclusions.

#### 4. Results and Discussion.

The analysis of the interview starts with positive politeness strategies. Positive politeness strategies are used more frequently if compared with negative politeness strategies (see Tables 1 and 2). The most widespread strategy is *Presupposing, raising and asserting common ground* (e.g. *We have to vote every time.*). In most cases, this strategy is used by Michelle Obama. She employs inclusive *we*, as in the example above, which is quite natural for her as for the person involved in politics, supposing that her interlocutors share her political values. Another often used strategy is *Exaggeration* (e.g. *This time is critical.*), which is mostly employed by Michelle Obama, and the author of the article believes that the strategy is used not only to gain interest and approval of her direct interlocutors, but also of all listeners of the radio show. The strategy *Intensifying interest to hearer* (e.g. *And I’ve always said that we have so many issues [...]*) is also implemented by Michelle Obama, possibly, for the same reason of intensifying interest and sympathy of all listeners. Several other positive politeness strategies employed in the interview, namely, *Jokes* (e.g. *And I said, ‘Don’t worry, when you get to South Carolina...’ - Right. (Laughter)*), *Taking notice of hearer’s condition* (e.g. *And you are in great shape.*), *Including both speaker and listener in the activity* (e.g. *[...] let’s figure out those small steps we can take and how we can support families in getting our kids in better shape.*).

#### Positive politeness strategies

Table 1.

| Strategy  | Frequency | Example  |
|---|-----------|--|
| Presupposing, raising and asserting common ground | 22        | Well, you know, my parents were always conscious folks.<br><br>We have to vote every time. |

<sup>22</sup> Transcript of the TJMS’ Interview with Michelle Obama 2010

<sup>23</sup> Nunan 1997, 149

<sup>24</sup> Dörnyei 2007, 134-136

|   |    |   |
|---|----|---|
| Exaggeration  | 15 | This time is critical.  |
| Including both speaker and listener in the activity | 10 | [...] let's figure out those small steps we can take and how we can support families in getting our kids in better shape.   |
| Taking notice of H's condition                      | 4  | And you are in great shape.   |
| Intensifying interest to H                          | 4  | And I've always said that we have so many issues [...].   |
| Seeking agreement                                   | 4  | -Two years later – two years after we had that conversation, here we are, and people are saying that black people are not going to show up to vote.<br>-Right.  |
| Jokes   | 3  | -And I said, 'Don't worry, when you get to South Carolina...'<br>-Right. (Laughter)   |
| Avoiding disagreement                               | 1  | -Will you be bringing Mrs. Robinson with you to vote?<br>-No. [...] But I'm sure in her early voting. She's on the top of her voting. [...]<br>-And that's where you got yours from, right? [...]<br>-Well, you know, my parents were always conscious folks. |

Eight strategies out of total 15 provided in the framework are employed in the conversation. Thus, positive politeness strategies are prevailing in the interview, which shows the mood of approval and friendliness. It is believed that Michelle Obama uses this type of politeness on purpose, which is discussed further on in the article. The choice of positive politeness strategies by the interviewers can be explained by the willingness to create a friendly atmosphere, so the interview is more frank and, thus, more interesting for the listeners.

Negative politeness strategies are rarely used in the interview. The radio host Tom Joyner uses the strategy *Giving deference* in the first sentence of the interview, when saying: 'Good morning, *Mrs. First Lady!*'. There are two strategies that are used both by the interviewer and the interviewee, namely *Hedges* (e.g. So, *I mean*, we are at the point of [...]) and *Impersonalizing speaker and hearer* (e.g. *It is* not just about voting once [...]). Other negative politeness strategies employed are *Being pessimistic* (e.g. [...] perhaps we *could* use [...]) and *Minimizing the imposition* (e.g. Let me *just* tell your listeners [...]).

### Negative politeness strategies

Table 2.

|        | Frequency | Example   |
|--------|-----------|---|
| Hedges | 2         | So, <i>I mean</i> , we are at the point of [...]. |

|                         |   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Impersonalize S and H   | 2 | It is not just about voting once [...].         |
| Giving deference        | 1 | Good morning, <i>Mrs. First Lady!</i>           |
| Being Pessimistic       | 1 | [...] and something perhaps we could use [...]. |
| Minimize the imposition | 1 | Let me just tell your listeners [...].          |

Michelle Obama tries to show respect, however, she does it in a reserved manner. Surprisingly enough, the radio hosts also use negative politeness strategies with restraint, although speaking with the First Lady of the USA.

Next, there are several special cases to be analyzed, in which several politeness strategies are used simultaneously. In the sentence ‘Two years later – two years after *we* had that conversation, here *we* are, and people are saying that black people are not going to show up to vote’ there are two positive politeness strategies employed. The first strategy is *Seeking agreement* ([...] *and people are saying that black people are not going to show up to vote*) as the speaker has chosen a safe topic on which the listener would agree (and this reaction followed); the second is *Strategy Including both speaker and listener in the activity* (using inclusive *we*-pronouns). Another similar example: ‘But most of all, awareness has increased. *I mean*, people are – *we*’re having a conversation about this [...]’. One can observe a negative politeness Strategy 2 – *Hedges (I mean)* and positive politeness Strategy 12 - *Including both speaker and listener in the activity* (inclusive *we*-pronoun). Therefore, there are cases of mixing strategies.

Positive politeness strategies are prevailing in the interview. These strategies are preferred both by the interviewer and the interviewee. As positive politeness serves for the expressions of approval and friendliness, it is possible to state that the interview in general is friendly rather than formal. Moreover, positive politeness is a typical characteristic of American society, and the interview under analysis illustrates this tendency. However, there are several cases of the employment of negative politeness strategies. Despite the general friendly atmosphere of the interview, these strategies are used both by the interviewer and interviewee in order to show respect.

## 5. Conclusions

The research showed that positive politeness strategies were used more often than negative politeness strategies, both by the interviewers and interviewee (64 positive politeness strategies and seven negative politeness strategies). The prevailing positive politeness strategy was *Presupposing, raising and asserting common ground*, followed by the strategies *Exaggeration* and *Including both speaker and listener in the activity*. From the negative politeness strategies, the interlocutors used *Hedges* and *Impersonalizing S and H*. Both interlocutors aimed at minimizing threat to the hearer’s positive face, making the conversation friendly and displaying the sense of closeness. The threat to the hearer’s negative face was

minor, as the prevailing choice of positive politeness strategies demonstrates the absence of the fear of imposition, towards which negative politeness strategies are oriented.

The goal of the interlocutors was to have a friendly atmosphere, but it was done for different purposes. The interviewer used positive politeness strategies in order to make the interview more successful and lively, as any person would feel comfortable and open if the atmosphere is amicable. However, the choice of positive politeness strategies by Michelle Obama can be explained also by the wish to create a positive and friendly image, which can influence the audience. As the audience of the radio show is comprised by a big amount of people, and Michelle Obama is involved in politics, her choice of positive politeness strategies was based on her desire for being approved by the listeners (not only direct interlocutors, but all listeners of the radio show), as well as by the wish for creating a friendly image that would have a positive effect on the audience (who are voters).

The theme of politeness can be applied to any interview or debate, also on the intercultural level. Analyzing political discussions from the pragmatic point of view can help to reveal the 'hidden' information, which influences our minds and opinions. Thus, one can be aware of the great power of language and its role in political discourse.

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## СТРАТЕГІЇ ВВІЧЛИВОСТІ В ІНТЕРВ'Ю З МІШЕЛЬ ОБАМОЮ

Альбіна Ладиненко

### Анотація.

Метою цієї праці є вивчення стратегій позитивної та негативної ввічливості, а також дотримання цих стратегій в інтерв'ю Мішель Обамою. Це порівняння використання стратегій

позитивної та негативної ввічливості за допомогою інтерв'юерів та респондентів за допомогою розмовного аналізу, співвіднесення вибору стратегії з бажаним ефектом, якого учасники інтерв'ю планували досягти. Огляд кількох концепцій, таких як соціальне обличчя, загроза соціальному обличчю та види ввічливості, які були представлені. Емпіричні дослідження показали, що стратегії позитивної ввічливості застосовуються частіше ніж стратегії негативної ввічливості як інтерв'юерами, так і опитаними. Можемо констатувати, що метою співбесідників було створення доброзичливої атмосфери, але це робилося для досягнення різних цілей. Інтерв'юери використовували позитивну ввічливість, щоб зробити інтерв'ю більш успішним та жвавим, щоб будь-яка людина відчувала себе комфортно та відкрито, створювали дружню атмосферу. Так чи інакше, вибір Мішель Обама стратегії позитивної ввічливості можливо також пояснити бажанням створити позитивний і дружній імідж, який має вплив на аудиторію, як потенційних виборців. Вважається, що вибір стратегії служить для посилення інтересу і співчуття слухачам, а також з метою об'єднання. Стаття підкреслює соціолінгвістичну силу мови, виділяючи роль, яку вона відіграє у політиці для створення доброзичливого іміджу, який би позитивно вплинув на сприйняття аудиторії, тим самим допомагаючи розкрити «приховану» інформацію, яка впливає на наш розум та думки.

**Ключові слова:** позитивна ввічливість, негативна ввічливість, стратегії, інтерв'ю, політика, розмовний аналіз.

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