
Miriam A. Locher sets out in this book to "shed light on two phenomena that are both important in face-to-face interaction: power and politeness" (xvii). To accomplish this goal, she makes use of "naturally occurring disagreements" (xvii). As the general premise underlying her study, she states that "power can be exercised in any interaction involving two or more interactants" (9).

Locher's review of the current literature on power and politeness, especially with regard to power exercised through the use of language, is both thorough and insightful. But in the end, she declines to provide her own definition of power and instead offers a "preliminary checklist for understanding the nature and exercise of power" (39). This is her way of expressing hypotheses in operational terms. Power is: expressed through language, not explicable without contextualization, relational, dynamic, and contestable, revelatory of the connectedness of language and society, in need of freedom of action for its exercise, elicited by the restriction of an interactant's action-environment, and concerned with a latent conflict and clash of interests.

This is a large order already, and the concept of politeness proves to be no less complex. Here Locher uses a double definition: one for the speaker, an "intended, marked and appropriate behavior which displays face concern" (91); and one for the addressee, the interpretation of an utterance as polite.

Hence, power is a set of criteria, and politeness is a specific behavior (speaker) or an interpretation (addressee). Thus expressed, these definitions are hardly at the same conceptual level. In collocation, they spawn a certain incoherence, both theoretically and empirically. As presented, power and politeness are apples and oranges that cannot be related to one another operationally. A good half of the book is spent begetting these entities, but without assuring their empirical viability or compatibility: Why is power not associated differentially with speaker and addressee in the same way politeness is? Is an addressee as such incapable of exercising power or recognizing power? And why is an addressee's politeness limited to recognition of politeness to the exclusion of its exercise? Is not listening itself an exercise of politeness rather than just a recognition thereof?

At a more general level, association with power is hardly the natural habitat of politeness, despite a number of sociolinguists'
conceptualization of it in that way. It has a life of its own to which Locher's conceptualization does not do justice. One can hardly expect to find an unbiased analysis of politeness in research in which the only relevant role for politeness is to subserve the purposes of power. Politeness is not just a counterplay to power.

How then does Locher get from her theoretical conceptualizations to the level of empirical analysis? She makes use of "naturally occurring disagreements" (xvii) from three sources: an argument during a family gathering, a planning meeting in a research institute, and public discourse on Election Day 2000 in the USA. Her methods of analysis bring us to the methodological critique of her research. A number of her empirical methods give one pause.

Qualitative Analyses. Locher presents power as "a concept that needs a qualitative analysis of data in order to become sufficiently identifiable for discussion" (36). She gives no explicit arguments for this need, but her listing of very complex criteria for the identification of power constitutes an implicit argument: Complexity requires qualitative analysis. The fact that the genome – perhaps the most complex concept yet investigated in modern biology – need not be analyzed qualitatively might well serve as a counter argument.

Biases. In the first sub-corpus, the argument during dinner, in which Locher's methodology is more explicit than in the other sub­corpora, there are a number of sources of bias. Two participants were absent for "quite a while" and one "received two lengthy phone calls" (107). Other activities were taking place at the same time, e.g., serving, offering, thanking for food, changing the audio tape (during which some of the conversation could not be recorded). Locher herself was one of the participants. Quantity of words spoken is her measure of amount of production. But there is a wide range of syllables per word (syl/w) for the various participants, and this renders number of words a distorted measure of amount of speaking. A probe of these ratios carried out by this reviewer yielded syl/w ratios ranging from 1.1 to 1.8 for individual speakers. Normatively, these are huge differences¹. In addition, the frequency-of-response measures, such as hedges, should have been normalized in terms of overall production of speaking rather than being compared as raw frequencies. All in all, even the claim that the tables give "a rough idea of the participants' behavior" (106) must be challenged. Since all three of the people who were absent for unspecified durations of time were women, comparisons of amount of participation on the part of men and women are unwarranted. The same must be said for the dominance of two of the male speakers during the argument. In order to "avoid comparing apples and pears," Locher
"translated the number of hedges into the number of words realizing them" (116). This logic literally prevents rather than facilitates a fair comparison. By counting a contracted word as two words, the procedure yields utterances for which syl/w < 1: an articulatory impossibility.

Transcription Conventions. Locher adapts from Du Bois\(^2\) a number of transcription notations already in use for other purposes in ordinary written discourse. For example, a triple ellipse does not signify the traditional omission of text, but rather "a medium or very long pause" (viii). Despite its popularity, such usage violates basic principles of sign notation for the transcription of spoken discourse.

To return to the checklist, Locher confirms it as characteristic of power, but her method is an anecdotal selection of data, not a cogent inferential process. Her data are simply not adequate "to identify the linguistic underpinnings of the interface of power and politeness in disagreements" (215). In fact, it is not necessarily the case that "the exercise of power involves a latent conflict and clash of interests" (322). For example, a policeman may give an order to drive around a pothole; with such power one can have no argument. That "power can be exercised in any interaction involving two or more interactants" (9) is both trivial and not in need of scientific demonstration.

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