# GROUNDING POLITENESS[1]

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ABSTRACT. *Traditional theories of politeness, like Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) and Leech's (1983), claim a universal status which can be questioned on the basis of the evidence provided by studies on the politeness mechanisms of the most diverse cultures. In the present paper, we attempt to prove that one of the reasons which prevents those theories from reaching the desired pancultural validity is no other than their use of conceptual metaphors (i.e. a culture-specific construct) in their explanation of politeness. In addition, we would like to establish a firmer ground for a cross-culturally valid theory of politeness by considering the workings of some universal cognitive tools (i.e. image-schemas) in the conceptualization of this subject matter.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interest in politeness both as a social and linguistic phenomenon has been significant in the last three decades of the 20th century as evidenced by the number of papers that have appeared on the subject in international journals and monographs (e.g. Watts et al. 1992). Most of the latest publications on the topic have focused on pinpointing the inadequacies of classical theories, especially Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]). As has been rightly pointed out by Kasper (1990: 194), the most generalized overall critique of traditional accounts of politeness has to do with the fact that they are usually "over-

simplistic as theories with claims to universality". Kasper concludes that new contributions should aim at their revision and further elaboration.

Following this suggestion, it is my purpose to attempt a revision of two classical theories of politeness (i.e. Brown and Levinson's 1987 [1978]; Leech's 1983). In the course of my argument, I shall provide further objections to the claimed universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, as well as to the possibility of Leech's proposals on the topic ever reaching pancultural validity. The sort of evidence that I shall put forward arises from a new approach to politeness which follows the tenets of Cognitive Linguistics as defined by Johnson (1987) and Lakoff (1987). Within such framework I shall attempt to propose a plausible explanation for the origins of the problematic ethnocentrism of these two traditional accounts of politeness. While most recent work on politeness has concentrated on accumulating evidence from the most diverse exotic languages against the claims for universality of traditional theories, the present paper endeavours to go one step further by looking into the reasons why those theories cannot attain a panculturally valid status. Section 2 will be devoted to this task, since it does not seem possible to construe a theory of politeness with universal aspirations until the cultural specificity of such theories has been explained and its origins determined. Nevertheless, following Kasper's (1990: 194) challenge, section 3 of this paper will be concerned with the elaboration of Brown and Levinson's and Leech's theories of politeness. More specifically, I shall attempt to ground the concept of politeness in the bodily-based conceptual mechanisms (i.e. image-schemas) which, as Cognitive Linguistics has amply shown, underlie and make possible human thought, reason, and understanding. I shall conclude that the ethnocentrism of the aforementioned accounts of politeness is, by virtue of their inherent metaphorical nature, unavoidable and that, in this sense, those theories cannot be fully rejected, because they are well fitted to explaining the understanding of politeness in some societies (i.e. mainly western capitalist and individualistic societies). However, they should necessarily be elaborated and grounded in bodily experience in order to set up the basis for a universal understanding of politeness phenomena.

## 2. TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF POLITENESS AND THEIR LACK OF PANCULTURAL VALIDITY

Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) theory of politeness comprises three basic notions: face, face threatening acts (henceforth FTAs), and politeness strategies. Starting from the assumption that people from all over the world are endowed with *face*, that is to say, with a *public image* which needs to be preserved, they go on to notice that certain actions that need to be performed in our everyday interaction may threaten our interlocutors' face (i.e. they are FTAs). Finally, in order to counteract the undesirable

effects of FTAs, humans have developed politeness strategies which are just ways of performing such acts in a redressive or mitigated manner so that the threat to the hearer's face is minimized. Brown and Levinson support their account of politeness and, most importantly, the universality of the concept of face, on which the former rests, with evidence from three languages as diverse as English, Tzeltal, and Tamil. Nevertheless, such claimed panculturality has been repeatedly put into question by recent research, both from an empirical and a theoretical point of view. As O'Driscoll (1996: 3) remarks, the alleged universality of Brown and Levinson's theory has been undermined by the evidence provided on three different fronts. First, there are those objections to the universality of their *face-dualism* (Matsumoto 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992; Mao 1994). Second, we find a set of objections relative to Brown and Levinson's exposition of the role of face in politeness (e.g. Hill et al. 1986; Ide 1989; Matsumoto 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992). Finally, there is the negative evidence provided by the existence of some data to which Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness cannot be applied (Wierzbicka 1985; Matsumoto 1989; Gu 1990; Nwoye 1992; Mao 1994; Pavlidou 1994).

Objections of the same kind can be raised as regards Leech's (1983) account of politeness. Although nowhere in his writings does he explicitly assert the universality of his account, he does not deny it either. However, his theory of politeness is liable to suffer from an even higher degree of cultural specificity than Brown and Levinson's, since his analysis of politeness phenomena is restricted to data from the English language exclusively. Leech's proposals rest on the formulation of a Politeness Principle (i.e. Be polite) and a number of maxims which spell out how the former principle can be implemented (e.g. maxims of tact, generosity, modesty, etc.). These maxims operate on a number of scales (e.g. cost-benefit, optionality, indirection, etc.). Thus, the rating of the speaker's goal in the cost-benefit scale, for instance, will determine the required degree of politeness which shall be needed in order to minimize the inherently impolite nature of a costly act. As Wierzbicka (1985), Held (1992: 131), and Watts (1992: 46), among others, have pointed out, such maxims, as formulated by Leech, seem to have been derived from an inherently anglosaxon attitude towards politeness phenomena. By way of illustration, we may turn to the role of indirectness in Leech's account of politeness, where the use of indirect non-explicit utterances is regarded as a means of redressing the inherently impolite nature of costly acts (e.g. orders, requests). On the contrary, those speech acts which are meant to bring about a benefit to the hearer (e.g. promises) would be expressed, according to Leech, in a straightforward direct fashion. Facts of the English language largely confirm Leech's view on the role of indirectness in the successful achievement of polite interaction. This language, as well as many other European languages, offers a remarkable number of indirect expressions (both conventional and non-conventional) for the performance of costly speech acts such as requests. Likewise, confirming Leech's expectations, beneficial speech acts (e.g.

promises) seem to be mostly conveyed by means of codified or highly conventionalized direct expressions.

(1) ?I request you to do the shopping

(2) Can/could you do the shopping for me, (please)?

(3) Would you mind doing the shopping for me, (please)?

(4) I am so busy today! I'm not sure whether I'll be able to do the shopping myself...

(5) I promise to do the shopping

(6) I´ll do the shopping. Don't worry!

Examples (2)-(3) represent instances of indirect conventional requests. Example (4) is one of a limitless number of possible ways of performing an indirect non-conventional act of requesting. Nevertheless, request-instance (1), which rests upon the use of a lexical codification (i.e. performative verb *to request*), is not generally accepted as a good example of this illocutionary category due to its directness. On the other hand, typical expressions for promising show that English speakers use either fully codified (e.g. 5) or conventional (e.g. 6) means in order to produce this speech act type. In other words, the performance of beneficial speech acts like promising does not make a relevant use of indirection.

Accurate as Leech's observations may be as regards the interplay between indirectness and politeness in an English-speaking community, there is already a considerable amount of evidence from research on an ample variety of cultures which shows that Leech's identification of indirectness with the minimization of the impolite effects of costly acts simply does not hold for other linguistic communities.[2] Nwoye's (1992) analysis of politeness in Igbo, the language of South-East Nigeria, shows that speakers of this language do not feel obliged to use indirectness or any other mitigating device in the performance of inherently costly acts. Moreover, Igbo people often speak in an indirect fashion when producing beneficial, intrinsically polite speech acts. For instance, they do not make explicit invitations. On the contrary, they tend to produce indirect invitations like the following (Nwoye 1992: 322):[3]

(7) You met us well

(8) Your feet have struck (food)

(9) You have lucky feet

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2. Kasper (1990) offers a review of several works dealing with this topic.

3. The same phenomenon is found in Japanese. The concept of *Omoiyari* (i.e. anticipating and taking care of Alter's wants without verbal communication) explains the rare occurrence of direct invitations, which cannot be easily rejected, in this culture. For more information on the notion of Omoiyari, see Wierzbicka (1997) and Travis (1998).

With this in mind, our next question is why theories like Leech's and Brown and Levinson's are unable to explain politeness phenomena cross-culturally. In the case of Leech's account, the answer to this question seems, in principle, obvious. This author restricted his study of politeness to data from just one language. Consequently, the results arising from his investigation are bound to suffer, to a lesser or a greater extent, from a tendency to ethnocentrism. However, Brown and Levinson did not make the same mistake. They looked for evidence in support of their theory in three different languages (i.e. English, Tzeltal, and Tamil). In spite of such a typological perspective, their insights into the nature of politeness have also been proved to be far from having achieved pancultural validity. In the following section, I shall put forward a possible explanation for the incapacity of these theories to achieve a universally valid status. The explanation will be based on the fact that both theories make use of imaginative mental tools of a metaphorical nature (i.e. conceptual metaphors) in order to make sense of an inherently abstract concept; since metaphors are intrinsically culture-specific, it follows that any account of politeness which rests on such mechanisms will inevitably be bound to fail the test of cross-cultural applicability.

## 3. A COGNITIVE ACCOUNT OF THE LACK OF UNIVERSALITY OF TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF POLITENESS

It is already a well attested fact that our understanding of most abstract concepts is metaphorical. As Lakoff (1987, 1993) has extensively shown, the structure of concrete easily-aprehensible concepts (i.e. source domains) can be mapped metaphorically onto other less accessible abstract domains (i.e. target domains) in order to facilitate or, in some cases, even to make possible the understanding of the latter. It has also been observed that such metaphoric mappings can affect the nature of the inferences carried out in the target domain. In other words, metaphoric mappings can cause the target domain to borrow not only the structure but also the inferential patterns of the source domain. However, this process, in spite of its cognitive significance and usefulness, may also become a source of problems in the understanding of concepts. An interesting study supporting these claims was carried out by Gentner and Gentner (1983). These authors noticed that there exist two different metaphorical understandings of the concept of *electricity* (i.e. *electricity as flowing water* versus *electricity as a moving crowd*), each of which gives rise to divergent, sometimes opposing, inferences about this phenomenon.[4]

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4. Gentner and Gentner's (1983) analysis of these two metaphorical conceptualizations of *electricity* provides evidence in favour of the *Generative Analogy Hypothesis*, according to which analogies (i.e. conceptual metaphors) can generate inferences; and against the *Surface Terminology Hypothesis*, which claims that analogies only provide us with the necessary terminology to talk about concepts without constraining our inferences and/or understanding of them.

This seems to be the case with the concept of *politeness*. Since this is an abstract concept, we often make use of the structure of more concrete domains in a metaphorical fashion in order to make sense of it. A quick glance at the literature on the subject reveals metaphorical understandings of politeness as varied as the following. Lakoff (1975: 64), for instance, interprets politeness as a *social lubricant* aimed at reducing "the friction in personal interaction". Watts (1992: 44) understands politeness as "a mask [used] to conceal *ego's* true frame of mind [... and which] functions to avoid conflict, to tone down potential aggression, and to ensure that the interaction will be acomplished smoothly". Sell (1991:210) goes even further to describe politeness as the "velvet glove within which to hide one or another kind of iron fist [...]".[5] Finally, as shall be amply shown in the remainder of this section, two of the most comprehensive and systematic traditional theories of politeness, Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1978]) and Leech's (1983) also make use of metaphor to approach their subject. For reasons which shall become apparent below, Leech's (1983) account of politeness will be analyzed in conjunction with that of Clark and Schunk (1980), with which it shares the feature of being based on metaphors whose source domain is the world of economy.

Brown and Levinson's (1987[1978]) theory regards politeness as the kind of behaviour directed to preserve the face (i.e. public image) of the speakers. The correspondences which are established between the source domain (i.e. face) and the target domain (i.e. politeness*)* and which make up the metaphorical cognitive model of politeness are the following:

– PEOPLE ARE THEIR PUBLIC IMAGES (I.E. FACE)
– THEIR WANTS TO DEFEND THEIR TERRITORIES, NOT TO BE IMPEDED IN THEIR ACTIONS, NOT TO BE IMPOSED UPON, ETC., ARE THEIR *NEGATIVE FACE*.
– THEIR WANTS TO BE LIKED AND ADMIRED BY OTHERS ARE THEIR *POSITIVE FACE*.
– TO BE POLITE IS TO PRESERVE OTHER'S PEOPLE FACE, BOTH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE.[6]

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5. In spite of their visual impact, metaphors like the one put forward by Sell are clearly far away from offering a fully-fledged comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of politeness. The conceptualization of politeness as a velvet glove hiding an iron fist is only capable of accounting for the so-called *negative politeness* (i.e. politeness as a mechanism which attempts to avoid social conflicts through a minimization of the potential cost or face threatening weight of an act). However, there is also a second side of politeness phenomena, namely, *positive politeness* (i.e. those patterns of behaviour which are aimed at pleasing and enhancing *alter's ego*. E.g. acts of praising, congratulating, etc.). A model of politeness based just on Sell's metaphor would not be capable of accounting for this second aspect of politeness phenomena.

6. By way of illustration of the application of the face metaphor to the study of linguistic politeness, consider Brown and Levinson's distinction between *face-threatening acts* and *non face-threatening acts*. On the one hand, certain speech acts like requesting, ordering, or threatening, since they are impositions on the

Two observations about this cognitive model of politeness are in order. In the first place, it would be interesting to look for the grounding of the metaphor POLITENESS IS THE PRESERVATION OF FACE. In other words, it would be interesting to find out the reasons why this metaphorical mapping seems natural and acceptable to us. As Lakoff (1987) has repeatedly noted, metaphors are often grounded in physical or social experience. The face metaphor of politeness can be said to be grounded in the following way. In many cultures people's faces are regarded as reflections of their inner selves.[7] Within this interpretation, our faces are made to stand metonymically for the whole person (i.e. for both our physical and spiritual selves). Besides, lack of politeness generally results in embarrasment or humiliation, one of the most common manifestations of which is physical, namely, a blushing of the face.[8] Taking these facts into account, it is possible to understand the meaning of such common expressions as *to lose face* or *to save face*. In a literal interpretation, polite behaviour saves people's face by preventing embarrassing blushings. Metaphorically, as our faces stand for our whole selves, saving our faces can also count as preserving other non-physical, but equally important aspects of our selves (e.g. prestige, public image, reputation, etc.).

In the second place, it is also worthwhile to consider Brown and Levinson's metaphorical model of politeness in relation to Haverkate's (1994) distinction between the *transactional* and *interactional* dimensions of people's actions. Given that within their account the term face is metaphorically used to refer to the public image of people within the society to which they belong, Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness seems to be geared to the interactional dimension of this phenomenon. The transactional side of most of the interactions in which people get involved daily is thus obscured. Politeness is mainly viewed as a way of smoothing social interaction and avoiding conflict between people. The fact that politeness can also be used as a means of achieving objectives –as when we praise someone in order to gain his favours–, if not

addressee's freedom of action, are regarded as face-threatening and subject to negative politeness strategies (i.e. indirection, use of mitigating elements like the adverb *please*, etc.). On the contrary, those acts which are aimed at enhancing the alter's ego (e.g. praising) would be related to positive politeness.

7. In Spanish, for instance, there exists the expression *la cara es el espejo del alma* (*face is the mirror of one's soul*).

8. Such physical grounding of the metaphor under consideration explains that cultures as diverse as the English and the Chinese both share the notion of face. It is generally admitted that the notion of face is Chinese in origin. The *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (1951), for instance, points to the origin of idioms such as *to lose face* or *to save face* in the Chinese meaning of *face* as dignity, self-respect, prestige. Mao (1994: 545) has pointed to the fact that although the phrase *to save one's face* is not a Chinese idiom, *to give face* and *to lose face* are. He adds that the idiom *to save face* originally appeared in the English community in China. This borrowing of the Chinese metaphor by the anglosaxon community must have been eased by its physical basis (i.e. lack of politeness can result in embarrasment and its typical physical manifestation of blushing).

completely ignored, is certainly relegated to a secondary position. It should be emphasized that such partial nature of Brown and Levinson's account of politeness is a direct consequence of the workings of the metaphorical cognitive model that underlies their model. The face metaphor focuses on public image and hence on the interactional aspect of human relations. In contrast, other theories of politeness, which are based on metaphors of a different kind, will mainly focus on transactional aspects. This is the case with the so-called *economic models* of politeness of which I shall describe the following two below: Leech's (1983) and Clark and Schunk's (1980).[9] By means of a comparison of these two accounts, further evidence will arise supporting the fact that different metaphorical cognitive models can motivate different understandings of the same concept. In this sense, it should be borne in mind that different interpretations of a given notion arising from divergent metaphorical models can be either complementary or contradictory. Thus, Brown and Levinson's model, which concentrates on the interactional side of the *politeness coin,* and the economic models, which focus on its transactional side, are certainly complementary. On the contrary, as shall be shown below, Clark and Schunk's (1980) and Leech's (1983) accounts contradict each other, offering two opposite views of the phenomenon under consideration.

Analogies between politeness and money are not anything new. Together with Leech and Clark and Schunk, other authors like Fraser and Nolen (1981) have also attempted to explain politeness in relation to economy. Clark and Schunk's (1980) proposals seem by far the most radical among this group. Focusing on indirect requests, they describe this kind of interaction as an attempt by the speaker to get the hearer to provide him with certain *goods* or *information*. Since fulfilling the speaker's wishes takes up the addressee's time and energy, the speaker should estimate such costs and attempt to compensate them with an appropriate amount of politeness in order to avoid conflict with the addressee. It should be noticed that in this model, social conflict is not desirable because it can prevent the speaker from achieving his goal (cf. Brown and Levinson's model where social conflict is avoided for the sake of maintaining social commity and smoothing interaction). In sum, Clark and Schunk (1980) conceptualize politeness as a kind of exchange currency. Several other correspondences can also be observed between the source domain (i.e. economy) and the target domain (i.e. politeness) of their metaphorical cognitive model of politeness:

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9. Clark and Schunk's (1980) proposals can hardly be regarded as a model of politeness. They are merely an analysis of the paradigmatic case of polite indirect requests. However, the conclusions which they draw about the phenomenon of politeness are heavily influenced by the metaphorical model that underlies their analysis. Therefore, consideration of their approach to politeness in comparison to the one by Leech can serve to prove how different metaphorical cognitive models can determine the conclusions that are reached about a given object of study. In order to show this point, I think it is justified to include Clark and Schunk's (1980) account of politeness in my description.

– POLITENESS IS A KIND OF (COMPENSATORY) EXCHANGE CURRENCY
– PEOPLE ARE ECONOMISTS
– IMPOLITE ACTS ARE COSTLY ACTS
– A POLITE PERSON IS THE ONE WHO TRIES TO COMPENSATE THE COST OF HIS/HER (SPEECH) ACT WITH THE NECESSARY AMOUNT OF POLITENESS.

Leech's (1983) approach to the study of politeness also relies on a conceptual metaphor related to the world of economy. His metaphorical cognitive model of politeness consists of at least the following mappings:

– PEOPLE ARE ECONOMISTS/BUSINESSMEN
– POLITENESS IS THE MINIMIZATION OF COST AND THE MAXIMIZATION OF BENEFIT (I.E. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE ECONOMIST)
– IMPOLITE ACTS ARE COSTLY ACTS
– POLITE ACTS ARE BENEFICIAL ACTS
– A POLITE PERSON IS THE ECONOMIST WHO ATTEMPTS TO MINIMIZE COSTS AND MAXIMIZE BENEFITS
– THE DEGREE OF POLITENESS OF A(N) (SPEECH) ACT IS ITS RATING IN A SCALE OF COST-BENEFIT[10]

In spite of the fact that both Clark and Schunk's (1980) and Leech's (1983) theories of politeness are based on economy metaphors, there are several differences between them that should be noted. First, Leech's (1983) account is more comprehensive, since it explains cases of both *negative politeness* (i.e. minimization of cost in the performance of inherently conflictive acts. E.g. directive speech acts) and *positive politeness* (i.e. deference and enhancing of *alter's ego*. E.g. speech acts like praising, congratulating, etc.). On the contrary, Clark and Schunk's (1980) account only takes into consideration those instances of negative politeness. Hence, although it is capable of explaining conflictive acts (e.g. directives), it does not provide an account of positive acts (e.g. congratulating). Second, the conceptualization of politeness which arises from these two conceptual metaphors is contradictory to a certain extent. Even though both accounts see politeness as a means of enabling interpersonal transactions, they differ in their view of the role that politeness plays in facilitating such a task. Clark and Schunk's metaphor hightlights the compensatory power of the politeness exchange currency. As a

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10. As was the case with Brown and Levinson's account of politeness, Leech differentiates between positive (i.e. aimed at maximizing the benefit to the addressee) and negative politeness (i.e. aimed at minimizing the cost to the addressee). Speech acts can thus be classified into costly and beneficial acts, each one requiring different linguistic strategies.

consequence, in their account politeness is thought of as an *a posteriori* way of *compensating* the addressee for the unavoidable negative effects that costly (speech) acts may have for him. Thus, through compensation, conflict is avoided and their transaction has reasonable chances of coming off. On the contrary, Leech's metaphor gives rise to a conceptualization of politeness as a preventive *a priori* means of avoiding the conflict which could hinder a given transaction. More specifically, Leech's *preventive* politeness consists in the minimization of the cost and the maximization of the benefit. In this fashion, conflict can also be avoided and transactions can be given a fair chance to succeed. In sum, though both Leech's and Clark and Schunk's accounts of politeness regard it as a means of enabling transactions, they differ as to the mechanisms used to achieve this goal, namely, compensation for the cost in the case of Clark and Schunk's account versus prevention (i.e. minimization) of cost in Leech's model. In other words, as predicted by Gentner and Gentner (1983) two different metaphorical models of the same concept can give rise to two divergent (and, in the case under scrutiny, contradictory) ways of conceptualizing and reasoning about it.

The conceptual metaphors which characterize the three former accounts of politeness have been shown to be responsible for the three different, at times even contradictory, views of this phenomenon. The idea that such metaphorical conceptualizations of politeness are also to blame for the lack of universality of the theories under scrutiny comes as a logical conclusion. Conceptual metaphors are intrinsically non-universal (Johnson 1987; Lakoff 1987; Kövecses 1996). Consequently, those theories will be inevitably linked to a concrete culture –that in which the corresponding conceptual metaphor has been produced– and, as a result, will not be liable to achieve a universally valid status.

Brown and Levinson's face metaphor is based on the understanding of the concept face as the public image, prestige and/or status of people in society. Such a conceptualization of face unavoidably implies a sense of competitiveness. This makes perfect sense in our developed western society. However, as Watts et al. (1992) note, in less individualist and competitive kinds of society, such ideas of prestige, status, and competitiviness would be much less relevant. As a result, in this latter type of society, Brown and Levinson's (1987) face metaphor would be less powerful or even meaningless. In sum, the culture-specific implications of the metaphor which underlies their model of politeness hinder its aspirations to universality.

A similar argument could be put forward as regards Leech's (1983) model of politeness. As we have already noted, his theory is based upon an economic metaphor which cannot possibly be exported to explain politeness phenomena in cultures whose economic system is different from the one considered by Leech. As was the case with Brown and Levinson's (1987) account, the cultural specificity of the economic metaphor

which underlies Leech's proposals places a heavy constraint on its cross-cultural applicability.

The above discussion should not be taken as an argument in favour of rejecting traditional theories of politeness altogether. As the recurrent use of metaphors in theories on politeness shows, metaphorical thinking is as unavoidable as is the ethnocentrism which it brings along. For this reason, metaphorical models of politeness, like those described above, cannot be rejected. In spite of their limitations they are well fitted to explain the understanding of politeness in those concrete societies to which they refer. However, it should be borne in mind that conceptual metaphors are just one kind of several mental mechanisms which humans use in their conceptualization and understanding of the world. Other such cognitive constructs, like *image-schemas*, (Johnson 1987) are universal in nature and are not linked to any specific cuture. Therefore, finding out which of these constructs, if any, are used in our comprehension of politeness, should allow us to determine which aspects of this phenomenon are shared accross cultures and to establish solid grounds for the development of a theory of politeness with rightful universal aspirations. This will be our task in the following section.

## 4. GROUNDING POLITENESS: EMBODIMENT OF THE NOTION OF POLITENESS

Commenting on the lack of universality of Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, O'Driscoll makes the following suggestion:

> The only way to avoid this danger is to formulate concepts [...] which say nothing at all about any particular culture and, ideally, cannot be illustrated better with reference to one culture rather than another. My approach is therefore the opposite of empirical. Since cultures are so manifestly divergent, there is a limit to the value of searching for universals by piecemeal identification of recurring patterns [...]. In this paper, I *therefore look for universals in the existential characteristics of the human condition*.[11] (O'Driscoll 1996: 5)

I intend to follow O'Driscoll's proposals to a certain extent, searching for universals of politeness phenomena in pervasive aspects of the human condition. More specifically, I shall focus on just one dimension of the human condition, namely, the nature of our conceptualizing capacity. Therefore, paraphrasing O'Driscoll, I shall look for politeness universals in the essential characteristics of human cognition.[12] My

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11. Emphasis by the author of this paper.

12. My approach should not be understood as opposed to empiricism. I firmly believe that hypotheses need to be completed or confirmed by means of data in the form of behavioural evidence such as corpora of spoken and written language as people actually produce it. What I would like to question is the use of a purely

hypothesis is that by looking at the role which universal cognitive mechanisms play in the conceptualization of politeness, it should be possible to determine at least some of the cross-culturally shared characteristics of this concept. As pointed out at the end of the previous section, some such pervasive cognitive constructs are known as image-schemas.[13]

## 4.1. *Human Beings, environments, and container image-schemas*

Since politeness can only be understood in the course of interaction, the grounding of this concept should necessarily include those image-schemas which are involved in our understanding of the essential entities which make interaction possible. Basically, interaction takes place between *persons* and within an *environment*. Therefore, it is compelling to devote some attention to those image-schemas which underlie the comprehension of these notions.

Both people and their environment are pervasively conceptualized by means of the image-schema of a *container*. [14] There is no need to stop here long, as there is already ample evidence in the literature supporting these facts. Johnson (1987: 21) has drawn our attention to the fact that we are "intimately aware of our bodies as three-dimensional containers into which we put certain things (food, water, air) and out of which other things emerge (food and water wastes, air, blood, etc.)". Via a metaphorical extension, Lakoff (1993) has shown that our body-container is also the locus of non-material entities such as our *self* and *subject,* which are respectively the names he gives to the emotional and rational constituents of human beings. As regards the conceptualization of the notion of environment, Bergen's (1996) thesis represents a strong case in favour of the understanding of society in terms of a container image-schema. The conceptualization of people and their environment can thus be diagrammed in the following way:

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deductive method in the task of finding the universal basis of a certain concept like politeness, which seems to be subject to a well reported, vast, cross-cultural variation. Especially in these cases, I tend to see empirical data as a means of confirming or refuting a hypothesis, rather than as a means of discovering facts about language.

13. As defined by Johnson (1987: 23), image-schemas are non-propositional, pre-conceptual, abstract, very basic, and general mental structures which emerge from our own physical experience and interaction with the environment. Such nature allows image-schemas to ground other less apprehensible, non-material notions which cannot be understood in a direct fashion.

14. I use the term *environment* in a very lax sense. It can make reference to something as general as a society or a linguistic community or to more restricted notions of environment such as a social or family circle or even a temporal context of utterance.
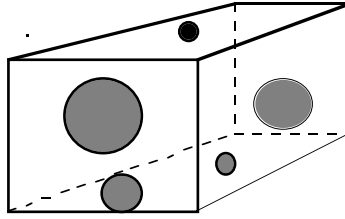
Figure 1. Conceptualization of *people* and *environment* as container image-schemas.[15]

Furthermore, as pointed out by Johnson (1987: 22), the container image-schema is endowed with an internal logic which is inherited by those concepts which are conceptualized as such. Those aspects of the internal logic of the container image-schema which are relevant to our discussion of politeness are reproduced below.

(i)   The experience of containment typically involves protection from, or resistance to, external forces. When eyeglasses are *in* a case, they are protected against forceful impacts (Johnson 1987: 22).

(ii)  Containment also limits and restricts forces within the container. When I am *in* a room, or *in* a jacket, I am restrained in my forceful movements (Johnson 1987: 22).

Peña (1997: 256-57) has undertaken an expansion of Johnson's description (1987: 22) of the internal logic of the container image-schema by means of combining it with other experientially basic concepts like *control*, *harm*, and *benefit*. As a result, she has put forward a list of generic entailments, one of which stands out for our purposes:

(iii) The interior of a container defines an area which prevents what is inside it from being affected and controlled by both harmful and beneficial exterior conditions. In the same way, harmful or beneficial interior conditions may affect and control the entities inside the container negatively or positively.

To the above characteristics of the internal structure of containers, I would like to add another one according to which

(iv)  containers may represent *ecological systems*. That is to say, every object within a container may have a specific location assigned to it, in such a way that any change affecting any of the constituent parts or entities of the container will have an effect on the rest.

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15. The actual form taken by the container (a cube or a sphere) is not relevant.

The fact that concepts such as people or environment are conceptualized as container image-schemas and that they inherit the above implications –or, to use Johnson's expression– entailments of the internal structure of image schemata, surfaces in our usage of language. Lakoff (1996) has noted several everyday expressions which reflect the conceptualization of human beings as bounded spaces (e.g. *He is good in the inside, but a bitch in the outside)*, some of which have even become lexicalized (e.g. *introvert, extrovert)*. Moreover, people are conceptualized as containers within the container of a given environment (e.g. society, social group, family, etc.). Thus people can be integrated in these groups, and therefore be affected by the logic of their corresponding container image-schemas, or they can be outside their boundaries (e.g. *an outcast*) and hence, not be affected by the entailments of their logic. As predicted by entailment (ii), being within the same environment-container (e.g. same social group) enables and eases interaction (e.g. *I don't know how to approach him, we live* in *different worlds*). Also, given that containers are usually understood as ecological systems, social environments, which are understood as containers, will also inherit this feature. By way of illustration, consider the fact that the promotion of a worker in a company (i.e. working place as environment), brings about a reorganization or rearragement of the positions of other workers within the firm, as well as of the relationships between them.

Granted that human beings are typically understood as containers which interact with one another within the boundaries of other bigger environmental containers, it is essential to consider which possible types of relationship can hold between human beings in relation to the environment-container. Such relationships can also be understood in terms of image-schemas (e.g. path, verticality, etc.). Two of them have already been noticed by different authors (Holmes 1995; Bergen 1996). I shall refer to them as *inner-relationships*, because they invariably occur within the boundaries of an environment-container, and I shall oppose them to *in-out relationships* which involve either an internal or an external location of one or both of the interactants.

Inner-relationships are those related to *power* and *social distance* and they correspond to two possible spatial relations within three-dimensional containers (i.e. vertical and horizontal). Let us see each of them in turn. The key word in most definitions of power is that of *imposition (*Leech 1983: 126; Brown and Levinson 1987: 77). People have power *over* other people. This enables them to *impose* their will or plans *upon* other persons, and makes them *superior* to those which have to obey them. It is obvious from the words in italics used to talk about power that the image-schema of verticality is intrinsic to the conceptualization of this concept. Power, therefore, can be represented by the following verticality schema:

HAVING POWER IS BEING UP
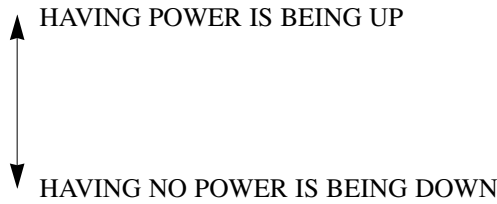
HAVING NO POWER IS BEING DOWN

Figure 2. Verticality image-schema and metaphorical understanding of *power* as
the position held in a vertical scale.

The metaphorical mapping of the verticality image-schema (source domain) onto
the domain of power (target domain) can be easily grounded in physical experience,
since higher locations generally allow more control and are, consequently, safer. Given
that power typically results in a greater degree of control over others, it is only natural
that it should be related to upper locations.

Another possible spatial relationship within a bounded area is that of *distance along
a horizontal path*. Certain kinds of social ties could not even be named without making
reference to this underlying image-schema. The relationships which hold between
relatives, workmates, friends, acquaintances, or strangers are made sense of in relation
to the degree of *social distance or proximity* that there is between them. Since the
amount of distance between two landmarks can only be established along an imaginary
line, the image-schema underlying social distance would be that of a path between two
points (i.e. two people). The length of the path determines the degree of distance or
proximity (i.e strangeness or intimacy) between them:

INTIMACY IS PROXIMITY:

A ⟷ B

STRANGENESS IS DISTANCE:

A ⟵―――――――――⟶ B

Figure 3. Path image-schemas and social distance.

The social distance metaphor described above also has an easily accessible
grounding in everyday social experience: in general, we tend to be and/or desire to be
physically closer (i.e. in the literal sense of sharing the same environment) to those
people who are intimates (i.e. relatives, friends, colleagues, etc.) than to those who are
strangers.

In contrast to inner-relationships like power and social distance, there exist some relations between human beings which involve the internal or external location of one or both of the interactants (i.e. In-out relationships). I shall consider two such relations. First, let us imagine the situation in which both persons A and B find themselves sharing the same environment (i.e. within the limits of a bounded space):
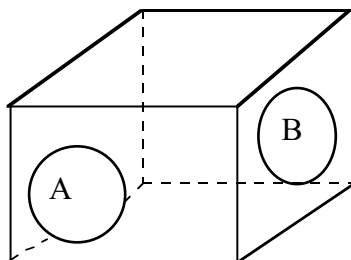
Figure 4. Entities A and B sharing the same environment.

According to entailment (ii) of the container image-schema, containers limit or restrict forces within it. This feature is inherited by those containers in which interaction may take place. Furthermore, different social containers (i.e. formal-informal contexts) may limit or restrict behaviour in different ways, requiring the use of different levels of politeness between those interactants who share a given environment-container. Second, it is also possible to think of a situation in which one of the interactants is inside the container-environment while the other one is outside it. This situation may have been consciously brought about by one of these people (i.e. B has been cast out of the environment container by A), or on the contrary, may be a natural situation (i.e. A and B just belong to different environment-containers). If the latter is the case, that is to say, if A and B are located within two different containers (e.g. belong to different cultures, social classes, etc.), it should be borne in mind that their behaviour -including the politeness aspects of it- will be restricted by the nature of their respective containers in different ways (entailment (ii) and this may hinder potential interactions between them. Figure 5 represents this phenomenon:

Figure 5. Entity B is outside A's container because it belongs to a different container.

This explains cultural differences in linguistic politeness behaviour such as the fact that in certain societies (e.g. English) the use of expressions like *please* and *thank you* in reply to an offer is much more strict and everpresent than in other cultures like the Spanish. While the English tend to use the aforementioned expressions in most cases, regardless of the power or social distance relation holding between the speakers, Spanish interactants regard them as necessary only on those occasions when there exists an asymmetry of power or a large social distance with the addressee.

On the other hand, if B is outside the container because A has wanted so, this situation may be reflecting the nature of the personal relationship between the interactants. As predicted by entailment (iii), harmful negative entities are not welcomed within containers because they may logically affect them in a negative fashion. Once more, this feature is inherited by social-containers. As a result, a human being which has negative traits (either physical, intellectual, or moral) is not easily accepted by society (e.g. naughty kids are expelled from class, dangerous individuals are casted out of society, etc.) and vice versa. As regards linguistic politeness, certain speech acts, like criticising and praising, can be made sense of respectively as either excluding or including the addressee within the speaker's container.
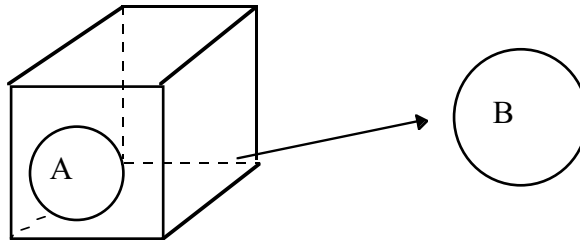


Figure 6. B has been casted out of A's container.

## 4.2. *The Embodiment of Politeness*

The remainder of the paper shall be devoted to show how politeness itself can be grounded in terms of the image-schemas involved in the conceptualization of those elements which enable interaction (i.e. people and environment). Moreover, in so doing those universal aspects of the phenomenon of politeness will become manifest.

A distinction has customarily been made between the so-called *discernment* and *volitional* types of politeness.[16] On the one hand, discernment politeness is understood as

16. The terms *discernment* and *volitional* were coined by Hill et al. (1986). The same distinction is captured by other authors under the names of *normative* versus *instrumental* politeness (Gu 1990: 242) or *appropriateness* versus *politeness* (Pandharipande 1992). Volitional politeness is also known as *strategic* politeness (O'Driscoll 1996: 15-16).

a form of social indexing (i.e. as the set of culture-specific rules of appropriateness. E.g. knowledge of the correct use of terms of address). On the other hand, volitional politeness is regarded as an instrument designed to facilitate the accomplishment of individual specific goals (i.e. as the set of strategies which enable the speaker to perform certain social acts. E.g. use of indirection). Let us look into the image-schematic grounding of each of these kinds of politeness in turn:

### 4.2.1. *Grounding Discernment Politeness*

The term discernment politeness has often been related to certain oriental cultures like the Japanese or the Chinese, in which discernment has been lexicalized into a strict system of honorifics (Ide 1989: 223; Matsumoto 1989: 218). However, more recent research calls for an extension of the term to cover all cases of use of politeness as sheer observance of culture-specific conventions of social appropriateness. Watts's (1992: 68) study of address terms in British local radio phone-in programmes, for instance, shows that discernment is just as operative (though not as strictly applied) in British English as it is in Japanese.[17] In sum, different cultures seem to share a similar concern for discerning what is appropriate and acting accordingly, which "operates independently of the current goal a speaker intends to achieve" (Kasper 1989: 196).[18] Two questions arise regarding discernment politeness: (1) why do societies as diverse as the Japanese and the English both show this type of politeness? and (2) why is the implementation of discernment politeness more strict in certain cultures as opposed to others? Both questions can be offered a satisfactory answer in relation to the image-schematic conceptualization of society as a container. The following explanation will also allow us to specify the level at which the claims of universality of a study regarding discernment politeness are valid, and the line beyond which analyses of discernment politeness should start to focus on the description and formulation of culture-specific expressions and rules.

Regarding the first of the questions posited above, the motivation for the use of discernment politeness in cultures as different as the Japanese and the British can be made sense of in relation to the container schema through which we conceptualize society (i.e. the environment within which interaction and politenes take place). The

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17. Moderators and members of the audience who take part in phone-in programmes are expected to use titles (i.e. Mr, Mrs, or Ms) to address each other, unless otherwise specified.

18. That is to say, both in Japanese and English, the use of a title in addressing someone can be used as a sheer means of acknowledging the relative social position of the speakers and not as a strategy aimed at achieving a certain goal. E.g. (secretary to boss) *Ms. Baum, there is a phone call for you.*

concept of society inherits entailments (i) and (iv) (see section 3.1) of the image-schema of container. First, societies are characterized by the protective nature that defines containers in general (i.e. entailment (i)). As a consequence, it becomes desirable to belong to a certain society, to find oneself within the protective boundaries of the society-container. Second, entailment (iv) of the container image-schema is also inherited by the concept of society and therefore, the latter is seen as an ecological system where each entity occupies a specific place. As shown in section 3.1, entities within a container are subject to two types of inner-relations (i.e. vertical-power relationhips and horizontal-distance relationships), which determine the position of a particular entity in a container. In the same way, people who belong to a particular society occupy a specific place in it. Given this conceptualization of society as a container, discernment politeness can be understood just as a means of marking one's belonging to the society-container and one's position within it. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that discernment politeness is found to operate in diverse cultures. Since the conceptualization of society in terms of the universal physically grounded container schema is shared by those cultures, they will all require an instrument of social indexing (i.e. a way of indicating the relative position of people within the society-container).

The second of the questions posed above dealt with the fact that discernment politeness seems to play a more important role in certain societies, like the Japanese or the Chinese, in comparison to other cultures, like the British. As shall be explained below, this phenomenon can also be given a straightforward explanation in cognitive terms. Let us reproduce again the image-schema which represents the setting in which politeness takes place (i.e. an environment and two or more people):
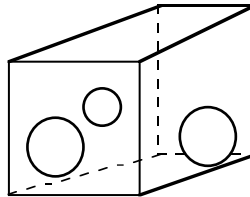


Figure 7. Container image-schema for the notions of *society* and *people*.

This complex image-schema is the same for both the Japanese or Chinese societies (where discernment politeness is nearly unavoidable) and for the British society (where discernment politeness, though operative, is not so strict and everpresent). Both kinds of society consist of two essential elements: an environment conceptualized as a bounded region in space and a number of people likewise conceptualized as containers. However,

the concept of society varies considerably from one culture to another. A widely accepted difference between the oriental and occidental notions of society is the fact that while oriental societies are more group-oriented, occidental societies tend to be more individual-oriented. This may be represented in the following way:
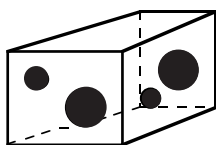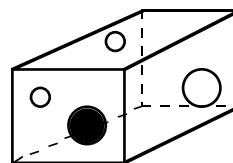


Figure 8. Group-oriented society.  Figure 9. Individual-oriented society.

Figure 8 shows how group-oriented societies (e.g. Japanese) emphasize the group over the individual, who is just one element of the highlighted group. On the other hand, figure 9 represents an individual-oriented society which elevates the individual over the group. In this case, it is the individual, not the whole group, who is highlighted. Taking advantage of Langacker's (1987: 183-184) terminology, figure 7 would represent the *base* or *scope* of the predicate *society*. Different cultures will highlight different aspects of the base, resulting in a certain *profile*. As Langacker explains, the semantic value of an expression will reside "in neither the base nor the profile alone, but only in their combination" (1987: 183). Thus, though the notion of society shares the same base in both the Japanese and the British cultures, each of them highlights different aspects of the base yielding different profiles. As a result, the concept of society is not exactly the same in each of these two cultures. In view of figures 8 and 9 above, it is easy to understand why discernment politeness should be more relevant in a society like the Japanese, where the group and the awareness of one's social obligations to the other members of the group are highlighted, than in a society like the British, where it is the individual, rather than the group, that is profiled.

In short, the fact that the concept of society is grounded in the same basic experiential container schema in different cultures explains that discernment politeness is present in all of them. Given that society is understood as a container within which entities hold two types of relationship (i.e. vertical-power and horizontal-intimacy), it is only natural that every culture may have a way of marking the position of each of its members along each of these dimensions and this task is carried out via discernment politeness. Besides, the fact that different cultures profile different aspects of the image-schemas involved in the conceptualization of society (i.e. the group vs. the individual) explains that discernment politeness plays a more significant role in those cultures where it is the group, rather than the individual, which is highlighted. Moreover, the claims of universality of analyses carried out on discernment politeness will only be valid at this level (i.e. at the level of pinpointing which universal cognitive constructs, like image-

schemas, explain the existence and relative weight of discernment politeness in different cultures). The remaining aspects of the study of discernment politeness will involve the culture-specific description of its modes of implementation, which as noted by Blum-Kulka (1992: 272) "will be constrained by the pragmalinguistic repertoire available in each specific language".

### 4.2.2. *Grounding Volitional Politeness*

Leech's (1983) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) accounts of politeness focus on its volitional side. Both theories are characterized by their conceptualization of politeness as the set of strategies (i.e. positive and negative politeness strategies) used by individuals to attain specific goals without provoking social conflicts. One of the main drawbacks of those theories, which prevents them from reaching the desired pancultural validity, has been shown to be their tendency to equate politeness with certain kinds of speech act (e.g. the act of *inviting* would be polite, while the act of *ordering* would be impolite) and certain linguistic strategies (e.g. the use of indirection as a means of increasing politeness).[19] Both speech act categories and the use of strategies like indirection are socially-learnt (i.e. different cultures have different idealized models about those concepts) and therefore they tend to be culture-bound and can be misinterpreted by other cultures. Furthermore, as shown in section 2, these theories define politeness metaphorically, which also contributes to their ethnocentrism. This, however, should not lead to the conclusion that there are absolutely no universals underlying the diverse culture-specific manifestations of volitional politeness. As shall be shown below, what is universal about volitional politeness can be determined by looking into those cognitive constructs (i.e. image-schemas) which are involved in our conceptualization of those notions (i.e. society-environment, people) which enable interaction and politeness to take place and which, due to their physical grounding, are universally shared by different cultures. In the remainder of this section, the universal motivations and constraints of politeness will be spelled out in this fashion. How each culture realizes politeness and which strategies are used in this task, however, should be the object of more specific studies of politeness in each particular linguistic community.

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19. The fact that the lack of indirection does not always result in lack of politeness, even when no other politeness strategies are at work, has been reported to be the case in some African languages (see Nwoye's (1992) study on the Igbo language in which requests are characterized by their directness). On the other hand, Tannen (1993) has shown how some speech act types, which had traditionally been regarded as inherently polite (e.g. inviting), can turn out to be impolite on certain occasions.

### 4.2.2.1. *Negative politeness*

It has already been shown that environments are conceptualized as containers and that they inherit some of the entailments which make up the internal logic of the container image-schema. In the following analysis of negative politeness, I shall specifically focus on entailment (iii), which states that harmful or beneficial interior conditions may affect and control the entities inside the container either negatively or positively. During the course of interaction, a conflict may arise between the participants. Furthermore, a conflict is a negative condition which can disrupt group activities and welfare within the environment-container. A conflict between two people can affect the peace of the whole container. Therefore, since it is a negative condition, conflict is not desirable and should be avoided. It is possible, therefore, to put forward a new definition of volitional politeness as the set of mechanisms used to avoid negative conditions (i.e. conflicts between interactants) within a given environment. The advantage of this definition over Leech's and Brown and Levinson's is clearly its wider scope. Leech's interpretation of politeness as the minimization of costly actions, and Brown and Levinson's explanation as the preservation of face wants can be seen as more specific, culture-bound instances of the more general vision of politeness as avoidance of negative conditions. While in the case of these two theories the understanding of politeness is tied to certain cultural notions (i.e. face, economy), our definition of politeness as avoidance of negative conditions does not suffer from such specificity since it is based on entailment (iii) of the internal logic of an image-schema (i.e. container) which, being grounded in physical experience, is shared by different cultures. This new definition also explains the universality of negative politeness. Since all cultures share the conceptualization of the notion of environment as a container within which conflict (negative condition) is not advisable, they must all posses an instrument for preventing or avoiding conflict, which is no other than that of negative politeness. It is true that what is regarded as negative (or conflictive) is to a large extent culture-specific (e.g. while in some cultures it is considered an offence to utter direct, unmitigated orders, in other cultures this is perfectly acceptable and far from being the source of any conflict). Likewise, the set of strategies which each culture has for the implementation of negative politeness is largely specific. However, it can be argued -as shall be further argued below- that at least some sources of conflict arise from our shared understanding of the notion of environment as a container and are therefore, universal. If this argument is correct, it should follow that every culture may also share a number of types of strategies which are aimed at minimizing or avoiding those universal kinds of conflict, even if the actual strategies differ from one culture to another. In connection to this, I would like to suggest that each of the kinds of relationship which have been shown to hold between interactants (i.e. inner relationships and in-out

relationships) is related to the concept of conflict in a certain way, thus giving rise to a number of universals of politeness. Let us see each one in turn.

–*Vertical–power relations*. Whatever the culture under consideration, all members of a given environment-container will naturally desire to occupy superior positions, either physical (i.e higher locations) or metaphorical (i.e. power positions), though only some will succeed in doing so. Therefore, interaction among participants who occupy different points along the vertical-power axis is a potential source of negative conditions (i.e. conflict). People at the top will tend to defend their superior positions, while people at the bottom will try to ascend to the top. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that containers (and hence environments) constitute ecological systems (entailment iv) where the actions of a particular person need to take into account the existence and relative position of other persons or entities in the container. Especially when one occupies an inferior position, he or she should be very careful that their actions do not upset those who are above them as the resulting conflict may have negative consequences for them. Hence, all cultures need to have strategies for avoiding this kind of conflict. No matter the actual nature of the strategies (e.g. indirection, use of grammatical items like the adverb *please*, etc.), all cultures need to have a set of negative politeness strategies aimed at avoiding conflict along the vertical-power axis.

–*Horizontal–intimacy relations*. In general, given the internal logic of the container image-schema which underlies the conceptualization of the notion of environment, conflict (i.e. negative condition) should also be avoided in our interaction with other people along the horizontal-intimacy axis. Moreover, it is a universal fact that the smaller the distance between two entities along this dimension, the more desirable it will be to avoid conflict. The pancultural validity of this statement lies on its experiential grounding. It is an experiential fact that the closer we are to a negative entity or situation the more likely we are to be affected by it. Likewise, conflict with those who are close to us (i.e. intimates) will affect us more strongly than conflict with those who are distant (i.e. strangers). Such a universal phenomenon explains that in some languages the use of nicknames or endearment terms serves as a politeness strategy of conflict avoidance. In sum, members of an ecological system like an environment-container should take into consideration their relative position along the horizontal-intimacy axis before they interact with other members. Since this is a potential source of conflict and conflict is not desirable, all cultures should have a set of strategies aimed at its avoidance along this dimension.

Finally, the discussion of in-out relationships within a container leads us to the consideration of the second type of politeness distinguished by Brown and Levinson (1987):

#### 4.2.2.2. *Positive Politeness*

Brown and Levinson regard positive politeness as having to do with people's desire to be accepted and admired by other members of his or her community. The reason why all cultures show this concern derives straightforwardly from the interplay between entailments (i) and (iii) of the container image-schema. According to entailment (iii) negative items or conditions are not welcomed within a container because they can affect the rest of the members in a negative way. It follows that those entities or persons who are considered negative will be pushed out of the environment-container (i.e. exclusion), while those who are regarded as beneficial or positive are welcomed within the boundaries of the environment-container (i.e. inclusion). Given that according to entailment (i), containers have a protective nature, it is much more preferable to be inside than outside of the boundaries of the society or environment-container (e.g. nobody wants to be an outcast). This is a universal fact given that all cultures share this conceptualization of society as a container. Therefore, all cultures are expected to have strategies aimed at effecting positive politeness, that is to say, at signalling *inclusion* (e.g. acts like *praising*). And others aimed at signalling *exclusion* (e.g. acts like *criticising*).[20]

## 5. FINAL REMARKS

I would like to end up this incursion into the experientially grounded nature of politeness in terms of image-schemas by presenting a concrete politeness phenomenon for which traditional theories like Leech's or Brown and Levinson's seem to have no explanation. Such phenomenon has to do with the existence of some languages (e.g. Igbo) in which the performance of conflictive speech acts (e.g. requests), without the use of any negative politeness strategy (e.g. indirection), is not regarded as impolite.

According to Nwoye (1992: 317), speakers of Igbo perform requests in a direct fashion, without the use of any overt politeness strategy, and without this resulting in an impolite kind of behaviour which may be the source of a conflict between interactants. This seems to contradict the findings of traditional theories of politeness (e.g. Leech's or Brown and Levinson's) which often relate directness in the performance of conflictive acts with impolite behaviour. Associating politeness with the use of indirection (i.e. a

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20. The acts of *praising* and *criticising* as examples of strategies of *inclusion* and *exclusion* respectively have been taken from the occidental culture. It should be borne in mind that this may not be case in other cultures. In Igbo, for instance, criticisms are not considered impolite in the least (i.e. are not used to convey exclusion). For a full explanation of this phenomenon, see Nwoye (1992: 324-326). What this shows once more is that, while all cultures share the possession of strategies aimed at signalling inclusion or exclusion, the actual strategies may differ amply.

strategy) prevents these theories from accounting for the workings of politeness in languages like Igbo and, as a result, from achieving universal validity. Taking into account our discussion of politeness in terms of image-schemas, it is possible to explain why direct requests are as unproblematically polite in Igbo as indirect requests are in other languages (e.g. English). The Igbo concept of society is similar to that represented in figure 8 above for oriental cultures. In short, it is a kind of society in which the group and its welfare, rather than the individual, are profiled. Given that it is the welfare of the group that is sought, acts requiring the aid or cooperation of others are regarded as a social right (Nwoye 1992: 317) and therefore, no mitigating strategy is needed. Since it is an obligation to work for the welfare of the group, acts like requesting cannot be a source of conflict and politeness (i.e. understood as a strategy aimed at avoiding conflict) is not needed. It can be concluded that the notion of politeness is shared by both the Igbo and the English societies. In both cases volitional politeness is understood as an instrument to avoid undesirable negative conditions within the environment-container. However, given their different conceptions of society (i.e. profiling of different aspects of the image-schemas involved in the conceptualization of society), polite behaviour makes use of different strategies: in the case of English indirection is used, while in the case of Igbo this is not necessary given the existence of an explicit social agreement to regard cooperation between members of the community as a duty, independently of the position that a person occupies in the verticality-power or horizontally-intimacy axis.[21] Such an agreement eliminates the possibility of conflict (i.e. negative conditions) arising in interaction and makes the use of politeness strategies unnecessary. The fact that it is not indirection, but rather the notion of society operating in Igbo (i.e. group-oriented) which is responsible for the degree of politeness of certain acts can be further proved by the fact that in some abnormal circumstances (e.g. when a request is addressed to someone who is physically impaired), the act is perceived as impolite, even if it is conveyed in an indirect way, because the addressee is not capable of fulfiling his social duty of cooperating with the speaker (see Nwoye 1992: 318). The above discussion should serve to illustrate the fact that the search for universals in politeness should not be pursued at the level of the specific strategies that implement it in each particular language (e.g. indirection), but rather at the level of its motivation (i.e. avoidance of negative conditions within environment-containers). Further evidence in support of this idea comes from observing what goes on, politeness-wise, when people belonging to different societies need to interact with each other. In such situations people cannot rely on shared cultural knowledge (i.e. the knowledge of politeness strategies) in

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21. Other group-oriented societies (e.g. Japanese) do take into account the verticality-power and horizontally-intimacy axes and therefore, in spite of being group-oriented, they do make use of politeness mechanisms in order to avoid conflict in relation to either of those two axes.

attempting to regulate their relationships, because those strategies may differ from culture to culture. Therefore, they usually define themselves as members of the same group (i.e. they come to share a common environment-container temporarily). It is assumed that both speakers comply with the internal logic of the shared environment-container. Thus, they have to assume that each other's actions, even if they seem impolite, must be well-intended, in compliance with entailment (iii) of the container logic, and they have to look for a polite interpretation of those actions. The assumption that negative conditions (i.e. conflicts) are not welcomed within their temporarily common environment helps to see each other's inappropriate behaviour as accidental rather than intentional.

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