Politeness in translation: the case of political discourse

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Abstract

This essay examines the conditions governing political discourse with regard to linguistic politeness. It analyses article titles from the French newspaper Le Monde Diplomatique and their translations into Greek. It compares linguistic markers of (im)politeness in French and Greek, trying to investigate whether symmetrical structures are preserved in translation. Some of the most frequent phenomena are tackled, such as impersonalization, nominalization, and the verbal aspect. It is observed that, in Greek, as far as article titles translation is concerned, the use of different markers attach the enunciator to his/her utterance in an explicit way, while in French a rupture is established between them. Given that this rupture signals distancing and politeness, it appears that the French language promotes more polite patterns, while the Greek language favors more direct and less polite ones. We conclude with the hypothesis that politeness
markers expressing a linguistic attitude may also reflect a general attitude of each linguistic community.

**Introduction**

The present essay constitutes a first attempt to explore the conditions governing political discourse in terms of linguistic politeness. We examine some linguistic markers with regard to the expression of politeness or impoliteness in the French and Greek language. We try to discover underlying operations as well constraints regulating the use of such markers. In other words, we aim to prove how linguistic markers "guide metapragmatically aware readers into implicated assumptions and implicated conclusions retrieved" (Ifantidou, 2011: 177). By contrastingly comparing the data, we aim to reach some conclusions about the existence or not of symmetrical linguistic structures in French and Greek, and, possibly, about the underlying cultural values specific to each language. Moreover, we investigate whether the Greek target version promotes patterns which privilege vantage point of politeness or favoring options that do not assume politeness.

We use the theoretical framework proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson as well as that of the Theory of Enunciation. Our corpus consists of article titles drawn from the French monthly newspaper *Le*
Monde Diplomatique and their translations into Greek, both from the electronic editions. The French examples are drawn from the newspaper’s official site www.monde-diplomatique.fr; their Greek translations are taken either from the newspaper’s official site in Greek, www.mode-diplomatique.gr, or from the site of the Greek newspaper Eleutherotypia, http://www.enet.gr. In the last case the translator’s name is not mentioned.

The framework

Politeness is a phenomenon which has been sufficiently studied so far, mainly because of its discursive importance and its serious implications in the interpersonal communication. Lakoff (1975: 64) explained that "Politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction". He also remarked that politeness "can be defined as a means of minimizing confrontation in discourse [...] designed specifically for the facilitation of interaction" (Lakoff 1989: 102).

To begin with some introductory theoretical points within the Brown and Levinson’s framework, politeness is "equivalent to face-work" (cf. also Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2013: 16). Consequently, terms such as face, positive and negative face, face threatening acts, etc. are very frequent and figure among the most debated notions. All these terms are referring to a variety of social strategies that construct co-operative social interaction across
cultures. Let us now focus on some parameters which will help us understand the phenomena and examples we study.


Culpeper (2013: 12) offers an interesting historical description of politeness in British culture, by associating indirectness to politeness. He explains that "Indirectness undoubtedly was given a boost in British society in the Victorian period, when values relating to the individual such as privacy and self-respect became highly prized".

Amongst others, Brown and Levinson (1987: 15) argued that there are three sociological variables that determine the weightiness of a Face Threatening Acts:

1. ‘the social distance’ (D) of Speaker and Hearer (a symmetric relation)
2. the relative ‘power’ (P) of Speaker and Hearer (an asymmetric relation)
3. the absolute ranking (R) of imposition in the particular culture.

The consequence is that the more hierarchical a society is, the more it's system of politeness is formal and elaborated (Burke 1999). This point had been demonstrated by Brown and Levinson (1987: 130), who put emphasis on the fact that, « generally negative politeness realisations are forms useful for social distancing whereas positive politeness realisations are forms of minimising social distance ».
Brown and Levinson (1987) consider that the politeness of a formula which contains a potentially threatening act for the face (FTA) is proportional to its degree of indirectness. This proposition is crucial to our study. It is obvious that the use of markers of politeness or impoliteness in our examples orientate discourse towards a polite or impolite direction, attributing accordingly characterisations to the enunciator and, consequently, to our languages of study (if not in general, at least, as far as political discourse is concerned).

Therefore, politeness and indirectness are inevitably bound to each other. This appears to be Sifianou's conclusion too (2001: 137) as far as the Greek-English couple of languages is concerned: «People are indirect in order to be polite». Let us also cite Sifianou (2001: 4) explaining that «although indirectness is primarily a sentence level phenomenon, it affects discourse organisation as a whole». Philippaki-Warburton (1982: 106) had already drawn attention to the fact that, in Greek, there is not one typical word order schema (such as SVO) and that all possible schemas, «all variations are produced by rules that are sensitive to syntactic features of the lexical elements of the proposition and to syntactic and pragmatic elements of the environment».

After this short overview of the existing literature on the subject, we proceed to a closer analysis of the translation of politeness between French and Greek. We are trying to find the extent to which certain syntactic features are used to fulfil pragmatic criteria of usage, whether syntactic
traces of politeness are preserved or not in translation, and how the degree of cultural proximity between the source language and the target language can influence the translation process. Our remarks are based on a broad sample, given the fact that we examined 200 titles of press articles and their translations, dating from 2008 until May 2014. The examples mentioned in the present essay are necessarily very limited, but, hopefully, representative.

**Political discourse**

The first question to answer is why did we choose examples from the political discourse and titles of press articles.

It is known that besides parliamentary debates, laws, government regulations and other institutional forms of text and talk, political discourse includes propaganda, political advertising, political speeches, media interviews, party programs, etc. (van Dijk 1997a: 8). Schäffner (2004: 118) additionally pointed out that:

It is generally acknowledged that the mass media play an important role in disseminating politics and in mediating between politicians and the public, also in a critical sense (cf. the concept of mediatisation of politics, Ekström 2001: 564). The topics which quality newspapers discuss in
texts on their front pages, in editorials and comments should therefore be good examples of political texts.

Moreover, these texts, of which the intention is to convince, use language as a means of persuasion and even of control and manipulation (see also Chadzisavidis, 2000: 38-39, 72). According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2013: 21) « they are intrinsically of a confrontational nature », thus they are bound by the notion of politeness and impoliteness. The interest of political discourse relies on the fact that, as argued by Bakhtin (cited by Holquist1981):

Undoubtedly, linguistic options for representing the world are clearly central issues in political discourse, but so are issues of action and textual production. Utterances within the context of political output are rarely isolated grammatical cases; they operate within historical frameworks and are frequently associated with other related utterances or texts. [cf. also Chilton and Schäffner3 (1997: 207)].

Going into the same direction, but one step forward, Gotovos (1996: 111-116) explicitly associated the media to financial profit and political influence.

Before proceeding to our corpus analysis, we should point out that it is obvious that press article titles intend to attract their readers' attention
(Chadzisavidis, 2000: 25). Van Dijk (1985: 77) explained that « Headlines may be used as expedient signals to make effective guesses about the most important information of the text». Ifantidou (2011: 91) confirmed the function fulfilled by headlines:

Headlines are often valued less for their summarizing function and more for their role as 'riveting' devices. Ambiguous, insinuating, humorous, playful headlines aim at attracting readers' attention than conveying objective, or complete information.

Therefore we will proceed to an examination of some linguistic markers that express (im)politeness, some linguistic devices employed by translators in order to register the creation of (in)directness. The markers we study include impersonal and personal structures (orientation of the predicative relation), nominalization and the verbal aspect.

**Corpus analysis**

(a) *Orientation of the predicative relation: (Im)personal, (In)direct,(Im)polite*

| (1) *Qu’importe les critiques?* | Αλλά, ποιος νοιάζεται για τις κριτικές; |

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Example (1) allows us to argue that the Greek translation is less polite comparing to the French original. Guillemín-Flescher (1981: 486) explained that:

When the predication does not concern the origin of the action / process, there is often in French an impersonal construction (*il faudra l'envoyer*), an indefinite pronoun as Co (*on l'a envoyé en colonie de vacances*), an inanimate or a nominalized predicate as Co (*une faiblesse la saisit tout à coup*).

Similarly, as shown by Chuquet and Paillard (1989: 141) about the French-English languages: « Where French uses impersonal constructions, English uses as a term of departure an animated element ». In other words, Groussier and Rivière's (1996: 58) hypothesis is verified:

the quality / animated / constitutes a superior degree of determination compared to the quality / unanimated/ given that the later can be either *discrete* (discontinu p.ex. *six daisies*) or *continuous* (continu p.ex.
coffee, courage) while the first is only animated and therefore more determined.

This also applies to the translation from French to Greek. When in French there is an inanimate Subject / Co associated with an animate verb, Greek tends to establish homogeneity (Chuquet et Paillard, 1989: 141-142). So Qu’importe les critiques? is translated as ποιος νοιάζεται για τις κριτικές; Consequently, while in French the predication does not address the origin of the action, which is obfuscated, in Greek, the abandon of the impersonal construction (containing the inanimate Subject / Co) in favor of a personal one (cf. Who instead of The criticisms) attributes to the utterance a more direct character, thus more aggressive and less polite (cf. also Sifianou 2008: 468).

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson (1987: 194) explained that the use of passive voice is one among the ways to avoid any clear and direct reference to the agents involved in the face-threatening act. They also claimed (1987: 194) that impersonalization (passive and circumstantial voices) expresses a negatively polite attitude (cf. also Sidiropoulou 2002: 56, Sifianou 2008: 468).

As far as the Greek language is concerned, the association of passive voice to formal / scientific and journalistic discourse and to distanciation has already been established (cf. Holton, Mackridge and Philippaki-Warburton 1999: 214, Sifianou 2008).
In this respect, we argue that, even thought the passive voice is related to the creating of distance, the presence of the interrogative pronoun referencing people (i.e. *who*), in the very beginning of the sentence, [instead of the interrogative pronoun referencing inanimate objects and animals (i.e. *what*)] contradicts impersonality/distance. Moreover, the interrogative pronoun could have be avoided, since it is more a loan from English than a necessity in Greek. This association has already been established by Apostolou-Panara (1999: 339) and adopted by Sifianou (2003: 382).

One more remark: *νοιάζεηαι* is a passive form expressing reflexivity (verbe pronominal intrinsèque), a reflexive verb that is lacking « the corresponding non-reflexive from which they can be synchronically derived».  

The assumption that can be drawn from what has been said so far is that, not only the politeness of the original proposition is not translated in Greek, but, on the contrary, the combination of homogenization (animated subject) and passive voice attributes to the utterance a more impolite character, according to Kerbrat-Orecchioni’s classification (2013: 20-21). Thus, choosing the passive voice instead of the active one is not an accident. This use provides means for illustrating lack of politeness and presence of aggression.

Example (2) leads to similar observations with regard to the presence or absence of directness and, therefore of politeness:
The structure of the example (2) illustrates that the French impersonal infinitive is translated by the 2nd person singular in (2a). So, while in
French the co-enunciator is unmarked / not designated, Greek establishes a location relative to (répérage par rapport à) the co-enunciator by using markers of the 2nd person singular (see also Guillemin-Flescher 1981: 365, Sidiropoulou 2003: 122, Nenopoulou 2006: 111, 114, Sifianou 2008: 470). Sidiropoulou (1995: 294), examining the Greek-English couple of languages, noticed that the use of first/second person pronouns constitutes «another linguistic device which supports preference for directness in the Greek press ». In French, the use of impersonal expressions, of infinitives, etc. establishes a rupture between the enunciator and it's utterance, rendering the utterance more indirect/polite. In Greek, the use of different markers attach the enunciator to his utterance in an explicit way (Nenopoulou, 2006: 111, 114-115). As consequence of this absence of distanciation, the utterance becomes more direct, thus more impolite, because of the use of the 2nd person singular, which constitutes an option among others without, nevertheless, being as neutral as the impersonal infinitive structure of the original version.

At this point we intend to remind our reader that the use of the 2nd person singular is related to what is called intersubjective relation (also called interpersonal relation) and which refers to the part of the meaning of an utterance that reflects social relationships between interlocutors (see also Antoniou 2004). Accordingly, any change at this feature in translation reflects modifications in the interpersonal relations and vice-versa.
It would be interesting to point out here that Greek possesses an *impersonal* alternative such the impersonal pronoun κανείς [ka'nis] + 3rd person singular, as in (2b) and (2c), which increases the distance among the interlocutors and is, therefore, considered as being more polite (Sifianou 2008: 470, Chareaudeau 2006: 8). This would have resulted in the translation να διαχειρίζεται κανείς μια ενοχλητική συμπεριφορά, which is both completely acceptable and more polite. It would convey the author's intention for indirectness. Nevertheless, not adopting this option constitutes a strategic process of dramatization (as demonstrated by Chareaudeau (2006: 8). Speaking of dramatization, Chadzisavidis (2000: 71-72) explained that deformation is a common path leading to accentuating (dramatizing) the event and, consequently, creating certain ways of thinking. This deformation actually constitutes a biased approach that conveys to journalistic discourse a sense of spaciousness which offers an alibi for exculpation of any guilt on behalf of the newspaper.

Example (3) also illustrates indirectness:

| (3) Ø Révolte américaine contre les ogres du fast-food [litt. Ø American revolt against the ogre of fast-food] | Η κατάρρευση του μύθου των φαστ-φουντ [litt. The demolition of the myth of fast-food] |
In this case (3), the degree of determination still differs. We claim that, in French, the zero determiner always refers to the notion and expresses qualification (not quantification). Therefore the Greek version constitutes an alternative pattern which differs in the degree of markedness it exhibits: it prefers deictic specificity, appearing through the transformation of the zero determiner (Ø) into a definite one \([H(The)]\) (cf. also Sidiropoulou 2003: 122). Within the framework of the Theory of Enunciation, Bouscaren and Chuquet (1987: 83) explained that:

The zero determiner (or absence of another mark) followed either by singular or plural, always refers to the notion, that is to the underlying predication of the constructed notional domain. Ex. "oil" = "what is oil" as opposed to what is not oil. It is about the qualitative value of the noun without any quantitative specification.\(^5\)

Moreover, Bouscaren and Chuquet (1987: 83-84) added that, depending on the context, we interpret the noun as referring either to generality (généralité) or to individuals (specific but undetermined), but in both cases zero determiner maintains it's main and qualitative value of referring to the notion (renvoi à la notion).

As far as the definite article \(H\) in the Greek translation is concerned, it indicates a clearly different degree of determination. It is the marker of pinpointing operation (opération de fléchage) where the collapse of the fast-
food myth is one among others (other collapses), an element that is set apart. The definite article makes of the noun κατάρρηση a representative of the class of collapses (αντιπρόσωπο της τάξης των καταρρεύσεων) (Νενοπούλου, 2006: 64). Consequently, replacing non determined elements with more determined ones influences the degree of qualification/determination and renders the utterance more direct and, consequently, less polite, as already argued.

(b) Verbal aspect

Examining further the example (2), more interesting conclusions could be formulated as far as politeness is concerned. It is worth talking into consideration another relevant point, which is the incidence of the verbal aspect in Greek. Διαχειρίζομαι / διαχειρίζεται is in the imperfective aspect while διαχειρίστεί is in the perfective aspect.

In Greek, the use of the imperfective aspect appears normal in this context (να διαχειρίζομαι / να διαχειρίζεται κανείς). The use of the perfective aspect (να διαχειρίστείς / διαχειρίστεί κανείς) would not have been possible. Actually, it would seem quiet peculiar. This is the reason why, although there is this readily available option (the perfective aspect), it is not actually used, because it does not register culturally compatible cognitive schemata. The explanation to this distinction is offered by
Sidiropoulou who associates directness to the durative (i.e. imperfective) aspect. Because of the « open-ended attitude with respect to time specification », the *durative aspect* also constitutes « another instance of subjectification», of directness and, consequently, of absence of politeness (Sidiropoulou 2003: 124, cf. also Giannakidou and Zwarts 1999: 106 and Theophanopoulou-Kontou 1999: 120-121 talking about different degrees of subject's implication).

(c) *Nominalization*

Continuing our comparative study, we claim that nominalization is a more politeness-orientated phenomenon. We examine examples (4) and (5):

| (4) *Quand la Chine grisonnera*  | *Κινέζοι με γκρίζα μαλλιά* |
| [litt. when China will be/become grey] | [litt. Chinese with grey hair] |
| Isabelle Attané, June 2011 | Attané Isabelle, (transl. Vassilis Papakrivopoulos), Sunday 3 June 2012 |

| (5) Immigrés dans les rets de la mafia calabraise  | Κομπίνες με επιδοτήσεις και μετανάστες στην Καλαβρία |
| « *Ils voulaient des bras, ils ont trouvé des hommes* »  | Αφρικανοί στα δίχτυα της μαφίας |
| [litt. Immigrants (caught) in the] | [litt. Rackets with subsidies and] |

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Such examples are characterized by the change in the grammatical category of the components of the phrase. More precisely, while in the French original there are *verbal phrases* (groupes verbaux), in the Greek translation they turn to *nominal phrases* (groupes nominaux) (cf. Guillemin-Flescher, 1993 [1981]: 477-478). This procedure creates distanciation of the enunciator concerning his/her utterance. This is why Brown and Levinson (1987) characterized nominalization as a distance creating device (cf. also Sidiropoulou 2004: 14). Sidiropoulou (2003: 34) also remarks that nominalizations are "negative politeness devices that raise the level of formality in interaction".

According to the Theory of the Enunciation, *nouns* refer to notions (renvoient à des notions) and they can be presented to the enunciator as more or less specified (particularized). The degree of determination/specification of the noun is determined in accordance of the presence / absence of determination. A *noun* can be registered within a span ranging from generality (also mentioned as pure and simple expression of a notion) to the absolute singularity of the unique occurrence. In our study cases, the
presence of nominal phrases in translation, deprived from determination, refers to the concept expressed by the nouns to a purely qualitative level, without reference to any particular situation. There is no quantification / identification of particular elements, fact that allows us to conclude that nouns refer to the pure and simple notion (Chuquet and Paillard 1989: 42-43). Given this explanation, the association of "pure notion" with the distanciation of the enunciator as well as politeness becomes obvious.

Sifianou (2001: 5) explicitly attributes to the case of nominalization the will to avoid reference to the agent, in other words, the creation of a certain distance of the enunciator from his utterance. This is undoubtedly the reason that nominal phrases are traditionally associated to a more erudite level of language, where distanciation is predominant (cf. also Sidiropoulou 2004: 14, Nenopoulou 2006: 110). This rupture with the situation of enunciation being equally possible in French, it's absence in our examples renders the utterances more direct, thus less polite.

As far as both examples (4) and (5) are concerned, we argue that the Greek translation is more polite. Nominalization is always present. Of course, we could consider that the copula are (i.e. caught) is omitted in the example (5); however, even seen through this point of view, the tense switch is considered by Brown and Levinson (1987: 120) as a positive politeness strategy (Sidiropoulou 2002: 56). The tense switch consists in that voulaient is a past continuous, while, in the Greek translation, the copula would be in present simple [are (caught)].
Apparently, there are counterexamples as well, such as the examples (6) and (7), where nominalization is translated by a verbal construction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(6) Déception au sein de la gauche américaine</th>
<th>O Ομπάμα χάνει την πίστωσή του στην αμερικανική αριστερά</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Le procès de M. Barack Obama [litt. Disappointment within the American Left {surerscript} - Mr Barack Obama’s trial {main title}]</td>
<td>[litt. Obama loses his credit with the American Left]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| (7) Entre rivalités tribales et intervention occidentale Libye, les conditions de l’unité nationale [litt. Between tribal rivalries and Occidental intervention {surerscript} - Libya, the conditions of national unity {main title}] | Το Εθνικό Συμβούλιο απέναντι στην ιδιόμορφη βεδούινικη παράδοση Η ενότητα στη Λιβύη περνάει από τις φυλές | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Patrick Haimzadeh, September 2011 | [litt. The National council against the peculiar Bedouin tradition {subscript} - The unity in Libya passes through the tribes {main title}] |
| | Haimzadeh Patrick, Sunday 9 October 2011 |
It becomes obvious that, in the Greek translation of the example (6), the predicative relation is oriented towards the agent of the process (cf. *loses*). Therefore, even though the present tense Enestotas (simple present) used in Greek is an aoristic verbal form, i.e. not having any temporal value and referring to the notion (see Antoniou 2000: 214, 2003), the predicative relation is clearly associated to a specific occurrence of *lose*, thus it becomes more determined / orientated towards a specific occurrence. Consequently, using a verbal phrase instead of a nominal one, the translator is opting for a more direct as well as less polite expression.

**Conclusion**

Our comparative study leads us to the conclusion that, in the translation of French article titles into Greek, literal translation is rarely used (see also Sidiropoulou 1995: 288 as far as the English-Greek couple of languages is concerned) and that different linguistic structures are used although there exist symmetrical structures in the French and Greek languages. It also appears that politeness markers expressing a linguistic attitude also reflect the attitude of each linguistic community (Philippaki-Warburton 1982: 106, Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997: 70, Chadzisavidis 2000: 134-135, Sifianou 2001: 4 and 133, Nenopoulou 2006: 114, Antoniou 2014a). As demonstrated by
Nenopoulou (2006: 111, 114-115), in Greek, the use of different markers attach the enunciator to his utterance in an explicit way. On the contrary, in French, the use of impersonal expressions, of infinitives, etc. establishes a rupture between the enunciator and it's utterance, rendering the utterance more indirect/polite. Consequently, given that in translation the absence of rupture is not transmitted, there is a stylistic/pragmatic differenciation. In other words, the rupture with the origin of the enunciation expressed in the French version is rendered in translation of article titles by markers of directness, which are associated with impoliteness/lack of politeness.

The organization of the utterances in Greek has as its center the subject/enunciator, while in French the center is set according to the relation enunciator/co-enunciator. Therefore, it seems that it is the French language that tends to be prone to social distancing whereas Greek language prefers structures that minimize social distance and attribute to the utterance a more marked/direct thus less polite character. In other words, while the original promotes patterns which privilege vantage point of politeness, the target version favors options that do not assume politeness or assume negative politeness, as shown in examples (4) and (5).

These conclusions associating directness with absence of politeness in Greek seem to be valid only for the case of political article titles, which is a specific gender of discourse. It is noteworthy that previous studies [Antoniou 2014a, Antoniou 2014b, Antoniou 2015 (forthcoming)] concerning the expression of politeness in comics, show evidence of a
diametrical opposite situation, such as solidarity of the enunciator towards the co-enunciator, proving Greek to be a very polite and very emotional language indeed.

We believe that the differentiation of our conclusions in the present study is a result of the specificity of the gender under consideration, i.e. political discourse, as well as of the constraints that regulate newspaper article titles and their translation (see also Chadzisavidis 2000: 134-135). The aim of such translations consists in attracting the readers' attention and in manipulating them rather than in informing and in being faithful to the original text; therefore, the use of various modifications is absolutely comprehensible (see also Sidiropoulou 1995: 286).

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"... most usages are indirect. For example, the imperative is rarely used to issue requests in English; instead we tend to employ sentences that only indirectly do questioning" (Levinson 1983: 264).

This is our translation from the Greek original.

According to Chilton and Schäffner (1997: 207) political discourse is "a complex form of activity" based on the recognition that politics cannot be conducted without language.


This is our translation from the French original: « L'article Ø (ou absence d'autre marqueur) suivi soit du singulier soit du pluriel renvoie toujours à la notion, c'est-à-dire à la prédication sous-jacente du domaine notionnel construit. Ex. oil = "ce qui est huile" par opposition à ce qui n'est pas huile". Il s'agit de la valeur qualitative du nom sans aucune spécification de quantité». 