

The Factor of Politeness in Unfavorable Book Reviews



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The paper is devoted to the genre of the review and is designed to examine the types of expressing negative remarks in unfavorable reviews.

A review is a critical evaluation of a literary work, published in a periodical or newspaper shortly after the work is published; it is also an advertising piece of writing of a critical estimation of various literary/artistic products. According to Hyland, the book review can be the first publication for novice scholars to join in the community and express their knowledge. Reviews are often written by scholars who have expertise in the genre or subject matter of the work being reviewed and are mainly read “for news about titles and more general information on the area covered by the review” (Hyland 2000:147).

As it is well known, book reviews belong to critical genres, the task of which is to introduce new books to the reader and assess the book value in relation to the development of the field. In book reviews the expression of the opinions is one of the central and important features (Thompson and Hunston 2000:10). Reviewers express their opinions by commenting on the book and by telling the readers about their attitude towards it. There is a general agreement that the book review is an essentially evaluative genre. The evaluation part in each review is of great importance, since it emphasizes the merits and shortcomings of the work. As Thompson and Hunston state, “Evaluation is the broad cover term, for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (2000:36).

There seems to be a general perception that book reviews are overwhelmingly positive, perhaps stemming from anxiety over appearing uncollegial or incurring professional setback. The discrepancy between positive and negative reviews makes sense as a way of highlighting points worth consideration. On the other hand, linguists claim that publishing negative reviews make sense when done in the context of recommending better sources for similar information (Katz 1986).

While positive reviews are a public award for the reviewee, for his impact on the development of science, negative reviews, containing judgments and therefore involving politeness strategies, highlight the drawbacks of the work thus threatening the author’s “positive face” (in Brown and Levinson’s terms 1982). Indeed Hyland notes that reviewer’s criticism can become a “potential source of friction because it can represent a direct challenge to a specific author.” (Brown and Levinson 2000:41).

The amount of harm that may undertake the reviewee depends on the means the reviewer uses for his critical evaluation. Since “the scientific etiquette” demands to soften the negative evaluation and highlight the positive points of the work, E.S. Troyanskaya suggests using the stylistic device “litotes” to understate the meaning of the negative remark and “hyperbole” to overestimate the positive remarks (Troyanskaya 1986:103). As Gea Valor states “, [...] mitigation strategies become necessary in order to alternate its unwelcome effects on the reviewee and make the criticism more palatable” (Valor 2000:146).

A thorough study of 60 book reviews revealed that negative remarks can be softened by such politeness strategies as putting criticism between the praises, using subordinate clauses and adjectives premodified by such adverbs as *somewhat*, *rather*, *quite*, etc., which have a downtoning or softening effect, often labeled “hedging” by pragmatists. Let us consider the following examples

Here are some examples

Although the book presents a wealth of insight on a great variety of issues, those issues seem to come more sharply into focus when they are grounded in actual examples of Spoken English.

(Peter Clements, 2006)

I would like to point out two important shortcomings of this book. The first one is its being somewhat too broad in coverage; specifically the last chapter [...] seems to be out of place here [...].

(Peter Arkadiev, 2005)

In order to mitigate their criticism, reviewers also use modal verbs *may* and *could* and the epistemic verb *seems*. Modality provides resources for book reviewers to modify their tones and consequently modify their relations with the authors of the books and the readers. It is found that modal choices here are closely associated with politeness. For example:

The book is extremely readable, even for an audience that may not be familiar with the syntax of complex sentences. Diesel must be applauded for providing the first comprehensive look at ALL complex sentence types in acquisition. Although it is an excellent overview of cognitive grammar and the usage-based modes, upon first encounter, one may wonder what Chapter Two is doing in the book. [...] Finally, the hypothesis is exiting.

(Jason Brown, 2004)

The context of the last example is that the reviewer is pointing at the book’s shortcoming. However, the tone of the reviewer is lessened by the functional use of the modal verb *may*. In this way the reviewer tries not to criticize the book, but to point out something he would like to discuss with the book author or the readers and consequently

saves the author's face. In the same example we can observe a compliment-criticism strategy, as one of the most widely applied methods of work evaluation.

According to Holmes (1989:46), "A compliment is a speech act, which explicitly or implicitly credits to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some 'good' (possession, characteristic, skill, etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer, while criticism "is the expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment on the volume [the book] (Hyland 2000:44). A review, which starts with the positive points, the good things about the piece, always grabs the reader's attention. The reviews should also emphasize the reasons for not enjoying the material. By pairing a compliment with a criticism the reviewer generates a "more balanced comment" (Hyland 2000:55).

Since the nature of the academic society in both countries differs, there are some differences regarding criticism and politeness between book reviews written in Russian and those written in English. A comparative analysis of book reviews written in two different languages reveals some culturally specific or universal characteristics of the genre. The results of the analysis show that there are some differences in the choice of means in naming both the reviewer and reviewee in negative reviews.

Russian reviews contain more direct references to the reviewer, whereas in English reviews there is a tendency to use the third person, which gives more an objective character to the critique, though in some cases direct references are also possible. Both languages impose more restrictions on naming the reviewee as the addressee of the negative evaluation. The strategies that book reviewers use to mitigate their criticism are to give agency to the text rather than author and to use the passive voice to obscure author's agency, though there are some cases when English reviewers name the reviewee.

In the following examples the reviewer moves responsibility from the book author to the '*chapters*'. The reviewer also deflects focus from the book author by using the passive voice:

*A further observation that can be made is that **chapters do not consistently make use of sample data.***

(Leah R. Paltiel-Gedalyovich, 2005)

*The section "Pronunciation" **might have been divided** into subsections for consonants, vowels, etc., as has been done in some chapters [...].*

(Marchin Kilariski, 2005)

Both languages express judgments using mainly an impersonal manner of statement. Eliminating the subject of statement corresponds to the widespread opinion about stylistic demands in scientific texts, as impersonality gives a more objective ontological status to the critical remarks. From the politeness theory viewpoint this tendency can be interpreted as the reviewer's intention not to harm the reviewee's reputation.

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Քաղաքավարության գործոնը բացասական գրախոսության մեջ

Սույն հոդվածում հանգամանորեն քննարկվում է գրքի գրախոսության ժանրը և վերլուծվում այն միջոցները, որոնք գրախոսը կիրառում է բացասական գրախոսություններում դիտողություններ անելու համար՝ առանձնակի ուշադրություն դարձնելով քաղաքավարության գործոնին:

Հոդվածում համեմատական վերլուծության են ենթարկվում անգլերեն և ռուսերեն բացասական գրախոսությունների նմանությունները, ինչպես նաև լուսաբանվում վերոհիշյալ լեզուների մշակութային առանձնահատկություններով պայմանավորված տարբերությունները: