Academic book reviews in English and Spanish: Is “giving reasons for critical comments” a universal politeness strategy?

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Abstract

In academic journal book reviewing, critical comments on the book under review (henceforth critical comments) can be considered potential face-threatening acts (FTAs). Given the especial interpersonal conflict potentially caused by assessing the work written by a peer in a public context, it may be wise for reviewers to mitigate their force. In the present paper we focus on a politeness strategy, i.e. giving reasons, which commonly serves reviewers to redress the force of the FTA potentially caused. We aim to provide insight into the extent to which scholars from different but comparable writing cultures justify their critical comments with supporting reasons, thus helping them to manage the potential interpersonal conflict created. Our empirical comparison is based on two comparable corpora of academic book reviews of literature, 20 written in Anglo-American English, and 20 in Castilian Spanish. The results show that, while reviewers in the two corpora offer a substantial amount of unjustified critical comments, these are proportionally more frequent in the Spanish corpus. Also, while the Anglo-American reviewers are more inclined to justify negative critical comments than positive ones, this tendency is opposite for the Castilian Spanish reviewers. A semi-structured e-mail questionnaire is piloted to see whether responses from reviewers to an open-ended question on these issues could reveal any explanatory information. Implications for English for Academic Purposes are drawn.

Keywords

Academic journal book reviews, critical comments, face-threatening acts, giving reasons, politeness, mitigation strategies, crosscultural academic discourse analysis, contrastive rhetoric, English, Spanish

Full details of forthcoming book chapter