

**THE PLACE OF THE MODESTY MAXIM AMONG OTHER POLITENESS MAXIMS**

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**Abstract:** The concept of politeness occupies a central position in pragmatic and sociolinguistic studies, serving as a key mechanism through which social harmony and interpersonal relations are maintained. Among various theoretical models, Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle and its associated maxims have played a significant role in explaining how speakers manage social interaction through language. This article focuses on the modesty maxim, examining its place, function, and interaction with other politeness maxims such as tact, generosity, approbation, agreement, and sympathy. Through theoretical analysis and illustrative examples, the study argues that the modesty maxim functions as a mediating and identity-regulating principle that balances self-presentation and social expectations. The paper further demonstrates that while the modesty maxim is closely interconnected with other maxims, it possesses distinctive pragmatic and cultural significance, particularly in collectivist societies. The analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of politeness as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a fixed set of universal rules.

**Key words:** politeness principle, modesty maxim, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, self-presentation, Leech

### **Introduction**

Politeness is a fundamental component of human communication, enabling speakers to negotiate social relationships, manage face, and maintain interpersonal harmony. In pragmatic theory, politeness has been conceptualized as a system of strategies that regulate linguistic behavior according to social norms and expectations. One of the most influential frameworks in this field is Geoffrey Leech's Politeness Principle, which complements Grice's Cooperative Principle by accounting for socially motivated deviations from purely informational communication. Leech proposed several politeness maxims, including tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, each of which governs different aspects of interpersonal interaction.

Among these maxims, the modesty maxim occupies a particularly complex and sometimes controversial position. While other maxims primarily regulate how speakers treat others, the modesty maxim focuses on how speakers present themselves, emphasizing the minimization of self-praise and the maximization of self-dispraise. This inward-oriented nature raises important questions about its relationship with other politeness maxims and its overall role within the politeness system. This article aims to examine the place of the modesty maxim among other politeness maxims, exploring its theoretical foundations, functional characteristics, and interaction with broader pragmatic principles.

Leech's Politeness Principle was developed to explain why speakers often choose indirect, mitigated, or seemingly inefficient forms of expression in social interaction. According to Leech, politeness is achieved by minimizing expressions that are unfavorable to others and maximizing expressions that are favorable. Each politeness maxim targets a specific dimension of social behavior. The tact maxim concerns minimizing cost and maximizing benefit to the hearer, while the generosity maxim focuses on minimizing benefit to the self and maximizing cost to the self. The approbation maxim encourages speakers to minimize dispraise and maximize praise of others, whereas the agreement maxim emphasizes harmony through minimizing disagreement. The sympathy maxim, in turn, promotes emotional alignment and shared concern.

Within this system, the modesty maxim appears as a counterpart to the approbation maxim. While the latter regulates positive evaluation of others, the modesty maxim governs self-evaluation. It encourages speakers to downplay their own achievements, abilities, or virtues, thereby preventing perceptions of arrogance or self-centeredness. This positioning suggests that the modesty maxim plays a balancing role, ensuring that interpersonal harmony is maintained not only through respect for others but also through restrained self-presentation.

The modesty maxim can be defined as a pragmatic principle that instructs speakers to minimize praise of the self and maximize dispraise of the self. In practical terms, this maxim is realized through linguistic strategies such as hedging, understatement, self-deprecation, and attribution of success to external factors. For example, responses like *"I was just lucky"* or *"It was a team effort"* function as politeness strategies that reduce the speaker's prominence in the interaction.

Functionally, the modesty maxim serves to protect both the speaker's and the hearer's face. Excessive self-praise may threaten the hearer's positive face by implying superiority, while modest self-presentation reduces social distance and fosters solidarity. Unlike other maxims that primarily manage speaker-hearer relations, the modesty maxim operates at the intersection of identity construction and social evaluation, making it a crucial element in the overall politeness framework. The modesty maxim occupies a unique position among politeness maxims due to its reflexive orientation. Whereas the tact, generosity, approbation, and sympathy maxims are predominantly other-oriented, the modesty maxim regulates the speaker's self-representation. This does not isolate it from the system; rather, it complements other maxims by ensuring equilibrium between self and other. In interaction with the approbation maxim, the modesty maxim creates a reciprocal pattern: praise of others is balanced by restraint in self-praise. Similarly, it aligns with the agreement maxim by preventing confrontational displays of superiority that could provoke disagreement. In this sense, the modesty maxim functions as a stabilizing force that supports the effectiveness of other politeness strategies.

However, the application of the modesty maxim is highly context-dependent. In some communicative settings, such as academic or professional discourse, excessive modesty may conflict with expectations of self-promotion and clarity. This highlights the dynamic nature of politeness maxims and suggests that the modesty maxim must be interpreted relative to situational norms and communicative goals.

The importance of the modesty maxim varies significantly across cultures. In collectivist societies, modesty is often regarded as a core moral and social value, deeply embedded in cultural norms and educational practices. In such contexts, adherence to the modesty maxim is seen as a sign of good upbringing and social competence. Conversely, in more individualistic

cultures, moderate self-promotion may be perceived as acceptable or even necessary, particularly in competitive environments.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, factors such as gender, age, and social status also influence the realization of the modesty maxim. Research has shown that women are often socialized to employ modesty strategies more frequently than men, reflecting broader gender norms and expectations. These variations demonstrate that the modesty maxim is not a rigid rule but a flexible pragmatic resource shaped by social and cultural forces.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the modesty maxim within Leech's system of politeness maxims reveals its distinctive yet integrative role in pragmatic theory. While it differs from other maxims in its focus on self-presentation, it remains an essential component of the politeness framework, contributing to interpersonal harmony and social balance. The modesty maxim acts as a mediating principle that regulates identity construction, mitigates face threats, and complements other politeness strategies.

This study underscores the need to view politeness maxims as dynamic and context-sensitive rather than universally fixed. The modesty maxim, in particular, reflects the complex interplay between language, culture, and social values. Further empirical research, especially in cross-cultural and discourse-based contexts, would deepen our understanding of how modesty operates in real-life communication and how it continues to evolve in contemporary discourse.

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