

Politeness

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1 Introducing linguistic politeness

CHARACTERISING POLITE BEHAVIOUR

Most of us are fairly sure we know what we mean when we describe someone's behaviour as 'polite'. To define the criteria with which we apply that description, however, is not quite as easy as we might think. When people are asked what they imagine polite behaviour to be, there is a surprising amount of disagreement. In an effort to find some kind of consensus we may of course take refuge in very general statements, but our usual way out of the dilemma is to resort to giving examples of behaviour which we, personally, would consider 'polite'. We might make statements like 'He always shows a lot of respect towards his superiors', or 'She's always very helpful and obliging', or 'She speaks really well', or 'He always opens doors for the ladies or helps them on with their coats', etc. Some people feel that polite behaviour is equivalent to socially 'correct' or appropriate behaviour; others consider it to be the hallmark of the cultivated man or woman. Some might characterise a polite person as always being considerate towards other people; others might suggest that a polite person is self-effacing. There are even people who classify polite behaviour negatively, characterising it with such terms as 'standoffish', 'haughty', 'insincere', etc.

Moving from evaluations of polite behaviour in general to the more specific case of polite language usage, i.e. 'polite' language, we encounter the same types of problem. To characterise polite language usage, we might resort to expressions like 'the language a person uses to avoid being too direct', or 'language which displays respect towards or consideration for others'. Once again, we might give examples such as 'language which contains respectful forms of address like *sir* or *madam*', 'language that displays certain "polite" formulaic utterances like *please*, *thank you*, *excuse me* or *sorry*', or even 'elegantly expressed

language'. And again we would encounter people who consider the polite use of language as 'hypocritical', 'dishonest', 'distant', 'unfeeling', etc. Talk about polite behaviour, linguistic or otherwise, is *metapragmatic* talk, i.e. it is talk about talk or talk about other people's general behaviour.

In addition to having our own personal assessments of what constitutes polite behaviour, we also have a tendency to opine on and thereby evaluate the behaviour of others, and sometimes – although much more rarely than might generally be expected – we classify that behaviour (or aspects of it) as 'polite' or 'impolite'. We might also use terms like 'respectful', 'courteous', 'offhand', 'rude', 'cringing', 'pusillanimous', etc. depending on what our own personal folk notions of polite behaviour happen to be. Personal assessments of polite or impolite behaviour can also be expected to vary quite considerably, and indeed they do.

We can best illustrate this by looking at a couple of real-life examples. Consider the following very short extract:¹

(1)

¹ R:	supposing you say		
	to me <LOW BURP>	beg your pardon\	supposing you
B:	oo::	<@pardon me@>\	yes\<@@>
² R:	say to me ...		
B:			

Taken out of context, anyone commenting on R's behaviour here might evaluate his low burp as impolite. B seems to take it as a joke, though, since she laughingly repeats his apology and, after appealing for him to continue what he was saying (*yes*), bursts into another brief round of laughter. So any interpretation of the burp as impolite behaviour by a commentator on the interaction in (1) is at odds in that evaluation with the ongoing assessment of the participant to whom R is addressing his utterance. R's expression *beg your pardon* might be interpreted as an acceptable way to atone for 'bad' behaviour. Some might call it an expression of politeness, whereas others might suggest that it is simply the commonest way of overcoming what Goffman (1955) calls an 'incident' – although, of course, they probably would not use that terminology – and is therefore a ritualised rather than a polite expression.

I shall return to extract (1) a little later. For the moment, however, consider the next brief extract:

(2)

¹ S:	yes \ can I come back on Mandy's point \ because I think this is one aspect . of TVEI \ which has been
C:	
² S:	totally underemphasised tonight \ what TVEI is about is creating fresh opportunities \ it is creating
C:	
³ S:	fresh initiatives – no let me finish \ it is a pilot scheme . where ...
C:	it's not \

Again, looked at out of context, C's intervention into S's turn at talk might be taken as impolite behaviour by some commentators, and, indeed, S is quick to capitalise on the possibility of this interpretation in his response to C. On the other hand, others might suggest that the extract seems to have been taken from an argument about the status of something called TVEI and that in an argument it is perfectly natural for one participant, generally an opponent, to intervene in her/his adversary's turn at talk. At the beginning of his turn S's *yes* is not obviously addressed to C, and he seems to be asking permission to return to 'Mandy's point' and elaborate on it. Some commentators might assess his expression *can I come back on Mandy's point . . .* as polite behaviour; others might suggest that he could just as easily have said *I'd like to come back on Mandy's point . . .* and that, far from being genuinely polite, he is only simulating politeness and is in reality currying favour with the person he is addressing or some other person or set of persons.

Contextualising both extracts might of course modify our evaluations of whether the participants are being 'rude', 'polite', 'hypocritical' or whatever. Extract (1) is taken from a family gathering in which all the participants are drinking home-made barley wine brewed by one of the participants. R is B's 41-year-old son and the general atmosphere is, to say the least, convivial. Extract (2) is taken from a television debate on TVEI (Technical and Vocational Education Initiative) during the 1980s. S is a Conservative Party politician and C is professor of education at a British university. Both of them are indeed opponents in this particular debate. S is addressing his turn at talk to the moderator of the programme as well as to the wider television audience viewing at home. But even enriching the extracts by contextualising them does not rule out different interpretations of (a) whether or not a participant's behaviour is 'polite' or 'impolite' or (b) whether the 'polite' behaviour is evaluated positively or negatively. 'Impolite' behaviour is, of course, hardly likely to receive other than a negative interpretation.

We can call the varied interpretations of politeness and impoliteness in ongoing verbal interaction ‘folk interpretations’ or ‘lay interpretations’. They are clearly not of the same order as the terms ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’ when these are used as technical concepts in sociolinguistic theorising about social interaction. Watts *et al.* (1992a) maintain that researchers into linguistic politeness frequently confuse ‘folk’, or ‘lay’, interpretations with the technical interpretation, and throughout this book I shall make a concerted effort to keep the two perspectives apart. I shall call ‘folk’ interpretations of (im)politeness ‘first-order (im)politeness’ (or, following Eelen 2001, (im)politeness₁) and (im)politeness as a concept in a sociolinguistic theory of (im)politeness ‘second-order (im)politeness’ (or (im)politeness₂).

Eelen refers to the kinds of metapragmatic evaluation of the nature and significance of politeness/impoliteness as *metapragmatic politeness*₁, and the comments made either by outsiders to the interaction or even by the participants themselves as *classificatory politeness*₁. He also suggests a third type of politeness₁, which he calls *expressive politeness*₁, in which participants aim at explicitly producing polite language. Expressive politeness₁ is in evidence when participants make use of formulaic language, presumably to adopt a respectful, or polite stance to the addressee. In extract (1) R’s utterance *beg your pardon* could be called expressive politeness. Had he said nothing, he would have indicated either that in this group of people burping is a normal form of behaviour and does not need to be atoned for, or that he is hoping that no other participants will have noticed the ‘incident’. Similarly, it is also possible to classify S’s *can I come back on Mandy’s point* in extract (2) as a formulaic utterance expressing concern for the moderator, although it’s perhaps not quite so formulaic as R’s utterance in (1). There is a difference in the two situations, however. In extract (1) R does not really have much choice but to use an instance of expressive politeness₁ if he does not want to be thought of as a boorish, ill-bred person. In extract (2), however, S *does* have a choice, and no one would think him impolite if he had used an utterance like *I’d like to come back on Mandy’s point*. S’s choice of language here appears to be strategic, whereas social constraints do not leave R any choice in extract (1). Both types of expressive politeness₁ (socially constrained utterances and strategically chosen utterances) have been the subject of theorising about politeness as a pragmatic, sociolinguistic concept. Before we go on to make a clearer distinction between (im)politeness₁ and (im)politeness₂, however, we first need to consider briefly the nature of the distinction between polite and impolite

behaviour, remembering while we do so that we are still referring to politeness₁.

POLITE AND IMPOLITE BEHAVIOUR

Eelen (2001) points out, quite rightly, that theories of politeness have focused far more on polite behaviour than on impolite behaviour. This is all the more surprising since commentators on and participants in verbal interaction are more likely to comment on behaviour which they perceive to be 'impolite', 'rude', 'discourteous', 'obstreperous', 'bloody-minded', etc. than on 'polite' behaviour, and they tend to agree far more readily in their classification of the negative end of the scale than of the positive end. Fraser and Nolen (1981) and Fraser (1990), for instance, suggest that behaviour which indicates that the participants are abiding by what they call the Conversational Contract (CC) generally goes unnoticed. It's only when one of the participants violates the rights and obligations of the CC that her/his behaviour is classified as 'impolite'.

Kienpointner (1997) has written on various types of 'rude' utterance displaying impoliteness, and Austin (1990) has discussed forms of impolite behaviour in New Zealand. In a rarely quoted but fascinating article, Baumann (1981) examines what he calls the 'rhetoric of impoliteness' among the early quakers in America. A small set of researchers have examined the function of strategic or mock impoliteness, following on from Labov's work on ritual insults among black adolescents in the USA (1975). Kotthoff (1996) has examined impoliteness in conversational joke-telling and Culpeper (1996) discusses 'mock impoliteness' or 'banter' which is not intended to be understood as serious criticism. Baroni and Axia (1989) have examined how children learn to distinguish between polite and impolite ways of formulating requests. But apart from this work and one or two articles of a more specialised kind, this seems to be the extent of the literature on impolite behaviour.

If Fraser and Nolen (1981) and Fraser (1990) are correct, perceived impoliteness should constitute salient behaviour that is commented on in conversation. Extract (2) in the previous section did indeed contain an explicit comment by S on C's attempt to interrupt him – *no, let me finish* – which can be interpreted as an outright rejection of C's intervention – *no* – followed by a statement implying that S interprets C as not wanting S to complete his turn – *let me finish* – which, having been granted the conversational floor, he has a right to do. Extracts (3) and

(4) display clear evidence of participants expressing their disapproval of the other participants' behaviour, even though they do not directly use either of the lexemes 'impolite' and 'rude'.

(3)

¹ E:	Peter Taylor reporting \ well with me in the studio watching the film \ is Mr Arthur Scargill \ president
S:	
² E:	of the National Union of Mineworkers \ Mr Scargill \ .. the issue causing .. the breakdown was/ all
S:	
³ E:	last week the issue .. at the front of the news \ and in everybody's minds \ was the .. union's refusal
S:	
⁴ E:	to accept the closure of uneconomic pits \ are you now willing to discuss: uneconomic pits \
S:	... we're
⁵ E:	↓ you're not/ sorry if I interrupt you .. there \
S:	not prepared to go along to the National Coal Board \ and start –
⁶ E:	y/ I- I/ let me just remind you that –
S:	↑ er: (..) :er: (..) are you going to let me answer the question \ you put a- a
⁷ E:	
S:	question \ for God's sake let me answer

The extract is taken from an interview on the BBC television programme *Panorama* during the famous miners' strike in the early 1980s. Even allowing for the 'freedom' that programme moderators seem to have preempted for themselves these days, E's intervention at the first double-shafted arrow in score 5 can be classified as an example of blatant interruption (cf. Watts 1991). This is evidenced by his insertion of the formulaic utterance of expressive politeness₁ *sorry*. S's intervention at the second double-shafted arrow in score 6 contains a highly emotive comment on E's behaviour, which constitutes clear evidence of the way he has interpreted it, even though he does not use either the lexeme 'impolite' or the lexeme 'rude'.

In the following extract from a radio phone-in programme on the subject of snooker and billiards, in which the moderator is accompanied by an expert in the studio, one of the callers feels somewhat left out at one stage in her call and protests (good-naturedly). The behaviour of the moderator and the expert is openly criticised, and the moderator is the first to admit the mistake. As in the previous extract, the word *impolite* is not used explicitly as an evaluative comment on their behaviour (classificatory politeness₁) by any of the participants, although non-participants commenting on this extract might easily classify it as such:

(4)

¹ M:	I would like to ask please/ I'm not really/ but I love snooker – how do I get a ticket for Sheffield\
J:	<@@@>
C:	
² M:	I have written every year\ and no one is answering\ and I am desperate\
J:	<@@@> (1.3) I would say (..)
C:	<@@@@@>
³ M:	I shall do so then\ uhuh
J:	write now\ write now\ 1.2 tell them he/ tell them you've been .. on the
C:	
⁴ M:	
J:	programme\ and we've suggested you write now\ they might be kind\ I'm sure they will\
C:	how do
⁵ M:	
J:	
C:	they distribute the tickets\ you know what happens at Wimbledon\ and you know that the- there's
⁶ M:	
J:	
C:	a ballot\ is there any sort of balloting system\ or is it first come first served\ is there- is there some
⁷ M:	
J:	well I mean\
C:	sort of membership\.. or VIP people who get the tickets f- first\ what exactly is the system\
⁸ M:	
J:	I wouldn't ... :er: profess to be expert at/ on this phase\ but :erm: I think if you write early enough\
C:	
⁹ M:	
J:	I think you'll get tickets\ it's a question of .. booking .. booking a couple of seats or whatever\
C:	
¹⁰ M:	
J:	for a certain day\ ... and if you get there early enough you'll get them\ if you- if you wait and
C:	
¹¹ M:	↓ can I come back in now\
J:	wait and wait\ and go on the offchance\ well of course it's terribly difficult\
C:	
¹² M:	↓ you've had your little tête-à-tête you pair\.. :er: can I just say thank you to all the players
J:	yes\
C:	
¹³ M:	for their marvellous entertainment\
J:	
C:	
¹⁴ M:	well they're all lovely people\ ... thank you very much indeed\
J:	thank
C:	thank you very much indeed\
¹⁵ M:	you\ bye now\
J:	
C:	bye bye\ ... ↓ felt she put me in my place there\ fair enough\ I think that's quite right\

M's utterance at the first double-shafted arrow in score 11 displays expressive politeness₁ in the formulaic indirect request *can I come back in now*, but it merely prefaces her critical remark at the second double-shafted arrow in score 12 in which she upbraids J and C for having left her out of the interaction. She has after all called to participate in the programme and is left hanging on the phone listening to J and C when *she* has the right to participate and *they* have the obligation to allow her to participate. There is also a clear change of footing immediately after this utterance. She inserts a pause and signals a shift to a further topic by using the pause filler *er*. After the exchange is completed, there is a significant pause of roughly one second after which the moderator C, at the third double-shafted arrow in score 15, assesses the significance of M's criticism – *felt she put me in my place there* – acknowledges his mistake – *fair enough* – and her right to intervene – *I think that's quite right*.

THE DISCURSIVE DISPUTE OVER POLITENESS₁

(Im)politeness₁, therefore, reveals a great deal of vacillation on how behaviour is evaluated as 'polite' at the positive end of the scale when compared with the negative end. It would also seem that whether or not a participant's behaviour is evaluated as polite or impolite is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions that s/he uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of that behaviour in the overall social interaction. The interpretations are thus first-order evaluations which are often not expressed in terms of the cluster of adjectives associated with (im)politeness. If they are, it is far more likely to be impolite behaviour which is commented on. If the researcher wishes to locate polite behaviour, s/he must begin by examining very closely what happens in the flow of social interaction in order to identify the kinds of behaviour that seem to warrant the attribution of the term 'polite'.

At this point, however, we encounter a further difficulty, one which may at first sight seem insurmountable. The term 'politeness' itself is in dispute among lay members of society in that they appear to be engaged in a discursive struggle over the value of the term. We saw in the first section of this chapter that characterisations of politeness in English-speaking societies range from socially 'correct' or appropriate behaviour, through cultivated behaviour, considerateness displayed to others, self-effacing behaviour, to negative attributions

such as standoffishness, haughtiness, insincerity, etc. This should not surprise us if we consider that other fairly commonly used lay terms such as ‘good/bad taste’, ‘culture’, ‘beauty’, ‘art’, ‘democracy’, etc. are also involved in discursive struggles. I shall therefore adopt the following position in this book: the very fact that (im)politeness is a term that is struggled over at present, has been struggled over in the past and will, in all probability, continue to be struggled over in the future should be the central focus of a theory of politeness. To put it another way, investigating first-order politeness is the only valid means of developing a social theory of politeness.

Does this then mean that a second-order theory of politeness, a theory of politeness₂, should only concern itself with lay notions of politeness? The answer to this question is equivocal: yes and no. Yes, in the sense that a scientific theory of a lay term must take that lay term in lay usage as its central focus, but no, in the sense that a theory of politeness should not attempt to ‘create’ a superordinate, universal term that can then be applied universally to any socio-cultural group at any point in time. If we were to do that – and I shall argue that this is exactly what has hitherto been done (by myself as well as others) – we would bring back and apply to the study of social behaviour a set of concepts revolving around a notion of politeness₂ that transcend the ongoing struggle over the term ‘(im)politeness’. We would then be studying something else in social behaviour which, although we might call it ‘(im)politeness’, is not what lay members of the social group would label in the same way. We would fail to approach an understanding of how the term is used and the nature of the struggle over its use. To put it briefly, we would create a concept of ‘(im)politeness’ which does not correspond to native speakers’ everyday conceptualisations of the term.

POLITENESS₁ AND POLITENESS₂

A theory of politeness₂ should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness₁, i.e. over the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members and not with ways in which social scientists lift the term ‘(im)politeness’ out of the realm of everyday discourse and elevate it to the status of a theoretical concept in what is frequently called Politeness Theory.

One thing at least is certain about polite behaviour, including polite language; it has to be acquired. Politeness is not something we are born with, but something we have to learn and be socialised into, and

no generation has been short of teachers and handbooks on etiquette and 'correct behaviour' to help us acquire polite skills. So, given the everyday nature of politeness, it might seem surprising to learn not only that it occupies a central place in the social study of language, but also that it has been the subject of intensive debate in linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics and, to a lesser extent, social theory for several years now.

In that debate, the term 'politeness'² means something rather different from our everyday understanding of it and focuses almost uniquely on polite language in the study of verbal interaction. My aim in this book is to approach the technical term 'politeness' from a variety of perspectives, with respect to ways in which it is manifest in language usage, and to highlight some of the controversies focusing on it. At the outset, therefore, I should state unequivocally that my focus will be on what has been called *linguistic politeness*.

An enormous amount of empirical research into the phenomenon of linguistic politeness in a wide range of cultures has been amassed over the years, much of it helping inch by inch to carve a way through what is still a very complex jungle of related ideas concerning social interaction. The research has made use of a relatively narrow set of 'theories of politeness' put forward since the early 1970s. As is often the case, one of these models, outlined in detail in 1978 by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson in the form of an inordinately long contribution to a book on social interaction edited by Esther Goody, has dominated all other attempts to theorise about linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson's work proved to be so influential during the 1980s that the original text was reprinted in book form in 1987 without any changes made to it but with an informative 54-page introduction addressing some of the problems in using the model that had arisen in the intervening nine years.

Clearly, Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) will figure very prominently in this book. Like all of the other theories of politeness₂ that have hitherto been proposed, however, hacking a path out of the jungle of ideas on social interaction has only served to make those ideas grow more quickly and become more rampant. Brown and Levinson's work will undoubtedly continue to exert as much influence on research into the subject in the coming years as it has in the past. But a number of crucial criticisms of Brown and Levinson's approach have emerged since the beginning of the 1990s, opening up broader perspectives from which to approach the phenomenon of linguistic politeness. In addition, the study of verbal forms of social interaction has now progressed so far that alternative methods of studying the phenomenon

of politeness are available. Although none of them is completely able to invalidate Brown and Levinson's conceptualisation of politeness, all of them can help us to refine and elaborate on their original insights.

The present book, however, should be seen as a radical rejection of politeness₂ as a concept which has been lifted out of the realm of lay conceptualisations of what constitutes polite and impolite behaviour and how that behaviour should be evaluated. If there is a scientific concept which transcends our everyday notions of (im)polite behaviour, to call it 'politeness' is not only confusing, it is also misleading. The present book does not aim to present yet another theory of politeness₂, but rather to help us find our way back to what we should be doing in the study of social interaction, that is, showing how our lay notions of social behaviour, as they are struggled over discursively by participants in social interaction, are constitutive of that behaviour and of the habitus of a historically situated and socially located *homo interactionalis*, subject to change as the locus of the struggle itself changes. The struggle over politeness₁ thus represents the struggle over the reproduction and reconstruction of the values of socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behaviour.

In the years since 1987 an important collection of contributions on cross-cultural differences in the realisation of speech acts central to much research in linguistic politeness, requesting and apologising, was published in 1989 by Shoshana Blum-Kulka, Juliane House and Gabriele Kasper with the title *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. In 1992 Richard Watts, Sachiko Ide and Konrad Ehlich edited a collection of essays on linguistic politeness entitled *Politeness in Language: Studies in its History, Theory and Practice*, which attempts to cover various historical, theoretical and practical approaches to linguistic politeness. Two books appeared in 1994 which lean heavily on Brown and Levinson's model of politeness, one by Hilkkka Yli-Jokipii with the title *Requests in Professional Discourse*, which is an investigation into the business writing practices of American and Finnish firms, the other a volume of essays on facework with the title *The Challenge of Facework: Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Issues* edited by Stella Ting-Toomey.

Maria Sifianou's doctoral dissertation was published in book form in 1992 with the title *Politeness Phenomena in England and Greece*, and in 1995 Janet Holmes published a book with the title *Women, Men and Politeness*. In the same year as Janet Holmes, Gudrun Held published her post-doctoral dissertation with the title *Verbale Hoflichkeit* [Verbal Politeness], in which she studies ways of theorising about linguistic politeness and presents the results of empirical research carried out with

French and Italian youths. The book has not yet appeared in an English translation. Since Held's book only three book-length publications that specifically deal with linguistic politeness have been published, Song Mei Lee-Wong's doctoral dissertation in 1999 with the title *Politeness and Face in Chinese Culture* and Saeko Fukushima's doctoral dissertation in 2000 with the title *Requests and Culture*. Gino Eelen (2001) has recently published a book criticising Politeness Theory.

However, with the possible exception of Eelen (2001), none of these books lays claim to being a critical introduction to the field of linguistic politeness. The time thus appears ripe for a book of this kind, one which will introduce readers to the controversies in the field of linguistic politeness without itself being uncritical, one which will help the reader through the maze of research publications on the topic, but above all one which will tackle the fundamental questions head-on:

- What is linguistic politeness?
- Is politeness theory a theory about a concept of politeness₂, or can it be formulated in such a way that it can shed light on the struggle over politeness₁?

One of the central claims made in Brown and Levinson is that politeness₂ is a universal feature of language usage. In other words, all of the world's languages possess the means to express politeness. Their claim for universality, however, is made in relation to their conceptualisation of an idealised concept of politeness₂, not in relation to the ways in which groups of participants struggle over politeness₁ (or whatever terms are available to them in their own languages) in social interaction. Nor should their notion of universality be understood to refer to the linguistic means through which politeness is expressed. In the first place, these means differ quite radically in terms of the structural types that realise politeness across a range of different languages. Secondly, the claim that politeness is a universal phenomenon of social interaction, particularly of verbal interaction, necessitates a shift of attention away from a primary focus on linguistic realisations of politeness₂ towards a more detailed look at the complexity of social interaction itself and the role politeness₁ plays in it.

THE TERMS 'POLITE' AND 'POLITENESS'

The major problem for anyone entering the field of politeness research is the bewildering ambiguity in the use of the terms 'polite' and 'politeness' themselves. In Watts *et al.* (1992b) the problem of terminology

is raised, but not solved (cf. Eelen 2001). Some researchers try to avoid the problem by suggesting other terms, e.g. 'emotive communication' (Arndt and Janney 1985a), 'tact' (Janney and Arndt 1992; Leech 1983), 'politic behaviour' (Watts 1989c, 1992), but 'politeness' always seems to creep back in.

In theories of politeness, the term is used almost exclusively to refer to the different ways of conceptualising politeness₂. But doing this only clouds the issue, since *polite* and *politeness* are lexemes in the English language whose meanings are open to negotiation by those interacting in English.³ Their meanings are reproduced and renegotiated whenever and wherever they are used in verbal interaction, which of course means that related terms such as *rude*, *rudeness*, *(dis)courteous*, *impolite*, *impoliteness*, etc. are also struggled over. To use a lay concept in one language as a universal scientific concept for all languages and cultures is particularly inappropriate. Take the hypothetical example of a Japanese sociolinguist discussing politeness₂ as a social concept with a German colleague in English. In a situation such as this there is no way we can be sure that either of them is referring to the same set of ideas represented by that concept. In the first place, we cannot be sure that some lay concept that might (or might not) be roughly equivalent to English expressions referring to politeness₁ in Japanese or German does not lie at the base of their conceptualisations of politeness₂. Secondly, if an English-speaking colleague joins the discussion, there is no way in which s/he can dissociate her/himself from English expressions referring to politeness₁ when applying the concept politeness₂. Thirdly, and most importantly for the present discussion, those English expressions are at the heart of a discursive struggle over their values. Fourthly, the ways in which '(im)polite' and '(im)politeness' (i.e. politeness₁) were understood in previous centuries are very different from the ways in which they are understood today, indicating that the struggle over politeness is in a constant state of historical change and flux. Is it therefore possible for the English-speaking colleague to discard her/his position in that struggle from the scientific concept under discussion, namely politeness₂?

Scholars from non-English-speaking cultures tend to distance themselves from the first-order concepts that exist in their own languages and are the subject of struggle in their own cultures and tend to elevate the rough translation equivalents of *polite* and *politeness* into their understanding of politeness₂. It would therefore be useful to review some of the variability in terms for politeness₁ used in other languages. My aim is to underscore the difficulty in distinguishing clearly between politeness₁ and politeness₂ from a terminological

perspective. I shall argue in this book that we should turn our attention away from setting up a notion of politeness₂ to investigating the discursive nature of the social struggle over the terms available to native speakers of other languages that refer to 'polished' behaviour, socially (in)appropriate behaviour, etc. If we do not want to give up the claim for universality, we will need to define politeness₁ in such a way that we can recognise it in verbal interaction in any language.

The first step is to assume that in all human cultures we will meet forms of social behaviour that members will classify as mutually shared consideration for others. Cooperative social interaction and displaying consideration for others seem to be universal characteristics of every socio-cultural group. By the same token, we will also meet forms of social behaviour that violate the principles of mutual cooperation and the display of consideration for others. Native speakers of any language will have individual ideas about what sort of behaviour is denoted by the lexical terms available to them, and very often they will disagree. In general, however, we must assume that there is likely to be a core of agreement about the rough outlines of what is meant.

As in the case of the English lexemes *polite* and *politeness*, terms in other languages – if indeed they exist at all – may vary in the meanings and connotations associated with them from one group of speakers (even from one individual speaker) to the next. Like the English terms, they are the locus of social struggle and are therefore open to semantic change through history. As a part of her research methodology Sifianou (1992a) conducted a survey of ways in which Greek and English subjects perceived first-order politeness in their respective cultures (i.e. she investigated metapragmatic politeness₁). In both cases 'consideration for the other person is seen as an integral part of politeness . . . but it seems that what is construed as consideration differs' (1992a: 92). And indeed this is the fundamental aspect of what is understood as 'polite' behaviour in all other cultures, even given the widely differing range of terms used to refer to it and the kinds of negative evaluation that may be assigned to it.

Greek informants stress the expression of concern and consideration for the addressee as the fundamental characteristic of politeness₁. Greek perceptions of politeness₁ (the rough translation equivalent of *politeness* in Greek being *evgenia*) stress the expression of intimacy and the display of warmth and friendliness. English conceptualisations of politeness₁, on the other hand, tend to be broader than those of the Greek subjects. Consideration towards others is stressed, but formality, a discrete maintenance of distance, a wish not to impose upon addressees, and expressions of 'altruism, generosity, morality, and

self-abnegation' (Sifianou 1992a: 88) are more important for the English subjects.⁴

There may not always be a unique lexeme that is equivalent to *politeness* in every language but where there is none, there will always be conventionally periphrastic ways of expressing a similar conceptual content. Nwoye (1992), for example, maintains that there is no equivalent term in Igbo, but he argues that what is meant by politeness in European cultures is conveyed by an Igbo expression meaning roughly 'good behaviour'.

The understanding of politeness₁ in Russian society is expressed through the lexeme *vezhlivost'*, the root of which is the verb *vedat'* ('to know, to be expert in', etc.) (Rathmayr 1999: 76). Like Sifianou, Rathmayr carried out a survey among Russian informants to discover their metapragmatic evaluations of politeness₁ (Rathmayr 1996a, b). She discovered that for Russians *vezhlivost'* 'vient du coeur' (1999: 76) and that Russians defined a polite person as 'likeable, calm, harmonious, attentive, cultivated, well-wishing, amicable, warm, well brought up, reserved, disposed towards recognising her/his mistakes, not gross, not insolent, not rude, positive, someone who always answers letters and who is prepared to listen to the same thing several times'.⁵ In general, then, the Russian conceptualisations of politeness₁, like those of Sifianou's Greek informants, tend to stress the expression of intimacy and the display of warmth and friendliness – apart from the term 'reserved' in Rathmayr's list of attributes.

But there is one significant difference between Greek and Igbo conceptualisations, on the one hand, and Russian conceptualisations on the other. Russians frequently maintain that a polite person should not use vulgar or coarse language. There is, in other words, a link between language and politeness in Russian metapragmatic politeness₁. Non-Russian commentators on the social behaviour of Russians, however, note the high degree of unmitigated directness in speech-act types, which contradicts the English tendency towards showing distance, reserve and formality.

Russian culture is certainly not exceptional in preferring more directness in speech-act types that may constitute face-threatening acts (for an explanation of this term see the glossary and chapters 4 and 5). For example, Gu (1990) suggests that in Chinese society the standing of an individual can only be inferred through his/her relation to the group. As a consequence, speech acts such as requests, offers and criticisms are not nearly as face-threatening or as imposing as they are in British, or even Greek, society. Both Gu and Lee-Wong (1999) stress the distinct Chinese preference for directness. The term that comes

closest to politeness in Chinese is *limao*, which, Lee-Wong (1999: 24–5) suggests, is a compound of *li* ('ceremony', 'courtesy', 'etiquette') and *mao* ('appearance'). She defines it as 'a code of conduct which stipulates how one should conduct oneself not only in public but at all times'. Like Gu (1990) she rejects the conceptualisation of politeness₂ as a set of redressive measures, but she also suggests that there might be certain individual needs that transcend the socially determined code of behaviour represented by *limao*.⁶

Blum-Kulka (1992) maintains that there are two first-order terms in use in Modern Hebrew that are equivalent to 'politeness', *nimus*, which has acquired the denotation of politeness only in the twentieth century, and *adivut*, taken from Arabic. Blum-Kulka's informants did not make clear and consistent distinctions between the two terms, but *nimus* appears to be more in use for formal aspects of social etiquette, whereas *adivut* is used to express considerateness and the effort to accommodate to the addressee. We seem to have a duality of terms here similar to the Greek *evgenia* and *filotimo* (see note 4), although the latter term in Greek has a stronger implication of honour and selflessness. Nevertheless, as in Greek, it is also the case for Modern Hebrew that *nimus* is frequently evaluated more negatively and *adivut* more positively.

Blum-Kulka also makes an interesting distinction between politeness in the public and in the private sphere. She suggests that complaints about lack of consideration, deplorable public service and lack of individual restraint in public places indicate 'the lack of clear conventions for politeness as a socio-cultural code' (1992: 259). Within the sphere of the family, however, there is a cultural notion of *lefargen*, which means roughly 'to indulge, to support, not to begrudge' (1992: 260) and which is redolent of positive values such as the expression of love and gratitude. Thus while Israeli culture is similar to Russian culture in its insistence on directness, there are nevertheless group constraints on cooperative social behaviour similar to Chinese and Igbo culture although on the more localised level of close-knit groups such as the family.

A study carried out by Ide *et al.* (1992) aimed at assessing the extent to which the adjectives 'polite' and 'friendly' in a range of more or less polite situations do or do not correlate in Japanese and American society. A rough translation equivalent of 'polite' in Japanese is *teineina*, which, as has been pointed out by Ide elsewhere (1989, 1993) and by Matsumoto (1988, 1989), does not refer to individual attempts to mitigate or avoid face-threatening, but, as in Chinese, or even more so, is part of a complex code of socially appropriate behaviour.⁷ It was found that

the adjectives *teineina* and *sitasigena* ('friendly') were evaluated along completely different axes from *polite* and *friendly*. Whereas in American culture 'politeness' correlates reasonably well with 'friendliness', there is no apparent relationship between the two sets in Japanese. On the other hand, the two adjectives *keii no aru* ('respectful') and *tekisetuna* ('appropriate') are closely related to *teineina* from the positive to the negative side of the scale, whereas *respectful* is a little further away from *polite* than *keii no aru* from *teineina* and *appropriate* is positioned on a very different axis from *polite*. This is strong evidence that the Japanese notion of politeness₁ as expressed in the adjective *teineina* is very different from the American notion. Indeed, perhaps more than in any other language, politeness forms have been largely grammaticalised in Japanese, with the result that unless the speaker is able to discern the degree of politeness required in any given social situation in accordance with the Japanese term *wakimae* ('discernment'), it is virtually impossible for her/him to produce a 'grammatically' correct utterance.

It would of course be possible to go on listing the rough lexical equivalents to *polite* and *politeness* in other languages, but there is little point in doing so. By now it should have become clear that politeness₁, whatever terms are used in whatever language to refer to mutually cooperative behaviour, considerateness for others, polished behaviour, etc., is a locus of social struggle over discursive practices. As such it warrants much more detailed study than has hitherto been the case in the politeness literature. In saying that, however, I do not mean to imply that this book will range over a diverse set of languages. On the assumption that my readership is English-speaking, I will restrict myself to examples from English with the occasional example taken from elsewhere.

POLITIC BEHAVIOUR, (IM)POLITENESS AND RELATIONAL WORK

The reader could be forgiven for feeling that in the previous section I was slipping gears a little in defining polite behaviour as mutual cooperation in verbal interaction and as displaying consideration for other participants. After all, if there is a discursive dispute over the social values of the terms *(im)polite* and *(im)politeness*, whichever social group and language we look at, how can we then determine single-handedly what politeness is? At this point it is necessary to recall what was said about impoliteness in an earlier section of this chapter. On the one hand, I suggested that native speakers are much more

likely to agree on the negative evaluation of forms of behaviour which they may consider 'rude', 'impolite', 'abrupt', 'offensive', etc. than they are on the positive evaluation of politeness. On the other hand, I also suggested that impoliteness is clearly a salient form of social behaviour in the sense that it appears to go against the canons of acceptable, appropriate behaviour operative for the ongoing social interaction. In extract (1) R's low burp immediately necessitated some form of verbal atonement for the offence, i.e. at least in this particular social group burping is salient, negatively evaluated social behaviour. In extract (2) S interpreted and commented on C's intervention as an illicit attempt to take the floor from him. In extract (3) S evaluated E's behaviour in not letting him answer the question he was asked as offensive behaviour and reacted accordingly. In extract (4) M gave a negative evaluation of J and C's behaviour, which was accepted as such by C after the exchange with M. In each case we have evidence on the part of a participant in the social interaction that s/he has interpreted a co-participant's behaviour as not being socially acceptable.

But what about polite behaviour? We also have evidence from the speaker's own utterances or from the ways in which we as commentators might evaluate what was said that some of the verbal behaviour produced in all four extracts was either necessary in the circumstances and therefore to be interpreted positively, e.g. R's *beg your pardon* after making his burp in extract (1), or was not necessary, e.g. in (2) S's *can I come back on Mandy's point*. R's utterance is socially constrained, and since it is expectable, we are unlikely to define it as polite. If he had not said it, however, we would be within our rights to evaluate it as impolite. S's utterance is interpretable as a strategic move since he could just as easily have stated directly what he wanted to say. It appears to be intended as an overt sign of deference towards the moderator and possibly also to the TV audience. If we interpret it as unnecessary but do not assign any further intention to S, the utterance can be viewed neutrally or negatively. If we do assign the intention to show deference, we are free to interpret it positively or negatively, depending on how we position ourselves with respect to the kind of behaviour which should be displayed on a TV debate programme.

In extract (3) E begins his interruptive turn, hesitates and adds *sorry if I interrupt you there* before continuing. In this case, E's formulaic utterance *sorry* prefacing an explicit statement of what he has just done is strategic. It is often classified as polite behaviour, but it cannot undo the threat to S represented in the fact that he has just interrupted him. So even if this is explicit polite behaviour, it is far more likely to be interpreted negatively by the TV audience, as it is by S himself.

Extract (4) contains a number of utterances that are open to interpretation as polite:

1. The beginning of M's first turn after she has been asked what question she wants to put to the expert: *I would like to ask please*
2. M's attempt to reenter the floor before protesting about J and C's behaviour: *can I come back in now?*
3. The introduction of M's fresh topic after her protest: *can I just say thank you to all the players for their marvellous entertainment . . .*
4. M's expression of thanks for being allowed to participate in the programme: *thank you very much indeed*
5. C's expression of thanks to her for having participated: *thank you very much indeed*

Points 1, 4 and 5 are realisations of the kind of verbal behaviour that those familiar with this type of phone-in programme would expect. They are in effect reproductions of discursive formats that have become institutionalised as expectable behaviour and as such they help to reestablish this part of the overall interaction as 'a call in a phone-in programme'. The linguistic expressions *please* and *thank you* are highly ritualised and do not, as such, constitute salient behaviour. On the other hand, M's utterances beginning with *can I* (the second of these hedged with the marker *just*) are salient, the first because she needs to reenter the floor in order to criticise J and C, the second because she is putting an explicit request to change the topic.

Hence, even from the meagre data we have looked at so far, it should be clear that there are linguistic structures in excess of what the speaker needs to utter which nevertheless go unnoticed, since they form part of the reproduction of institutionalised discursive formats. I have suggested elsewhere (Watts 1989c, 1992) that linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction, i.e. as non-salient, should be called *politic behaviour*. As we shall see in chapter 3, this is not quite the same as Fraser and Nolen's Conversational Contract. Linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable, i.e. salient behaviour, should be called *polite* or *impolite* depending on whether the behaviour itself tends towards the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness.

Note that I am not suggesting that the politeness₁ that is observable in an interaction is automatically evaluated as positive behaviour, or even that it is evaluated as (im)polite at all. What a theory of politeness should be able to do is to locate possible realisations of polite or impolite behaviour and offer a way of assessing how the members

themselves may have evaluated that behaviour. Nor am I suggesting that politic behaviour is some kind of Parsonian social reality, as Eelen (2001) has suggested. The very fact that we participate so frequently in a multitude of different kinds of verbal interaction but that we generally know or work out what sort of behaviour is expectable indicates that in entering and participating in those interactions we recreate them, we reproduce them. This in itself is evidence of the fact that most forms of social interaction have become institutionalised and that the appropriate discursive practices are known to us beforehand. *Politic behaviour* is that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction. The construction may have been made prior to entering the interaction, but it is always negotiable during the interaction, despite the expectations that participants might bring to it. In Watts (1989c: 135) I defined politic behaviour as:

socioculturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group.

And it is this definition which has led Eelen, quite justifiably, to the imputation of a Parsonian interpretation of social facts which exist prior to engaging in communication. My original definition assumes:

1. that all social interaction is geared towards cooperation, an assumption which the literature on conflictual discourse and impoliteness has shown to be false;
2. that the behaviour patterns constituting a social interaction are in some sense determined prior to entering the interaction, a point which is not entirely without some substance when we recall that participants do tend to model new instances of social interaction on their previous experiences and that very many instances of social interaction are to a greater or lesser degree institutionalised;
3. that social interaction has the major goal of assuring the maintenance of some form of social equilibrium.

Point 1 can be dispensed with only if we are prepared to abandon the Gricean assumption of cooperation, and this is exactly what, in a later chapter, I shall argue we will have to do. Point 2 is neutralised if we accept that any new occasion of social interaction enacts and therefore reproduces earlier similar forms of interaction, but is at the same time always open to discursive negotiation that might help to reconstruct the interaction type. Hence, from the point of view of the