

Politeness and impoliteness in interaction

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What is politeness? The case of ‘please’

Common answers

- Minding you ‘p’s and ‘q’s; saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’; ‘etiquette’ and good manners; being ‘courteous’; etc.

The case of ‘please’

- The ‘magic word’ of British parents
- Used with requests (connection with Speech act theory)
- But not any request -- used mostly with imperative requests (‘please make me a cup of tea’) or ‘could you’-requests (‘could you please make me a cup of tea’).

What is politeness? The case of 'please' (contd.)

- And not in any situation. Used mostly in formal situations, business letters and written notices ('Can you hold the line, please')
- Subject to cultural variation: more than twice as frequent in British English compared with N. American.

So, Americans are ruder? But there are other ways of doing politeness, and other evaluations of what it is to be polite (= potential for cross-cultural misunderstandings)

What is politeness? The pragmatic view

Linguistic politeness = the use of communicative strategies to maintain or promote social harmony. This view can be seen in traditional and dominant politeness theories (Leech 1983: 82; Brown & Levinson 1987: 1; Lakoff 1989: 102).

“All that is really being claimed is that people employ certain strategies (including the 50+ strategies described by Leech, B&L, and others) for reasons of expediency – experience has taught us that particular strategies are likely to succeed in given circumstances, so we use them.” (Thomas 1995: 179)

A face-based model: Brown & Levinson (1987)

Face

Everyday meaning (cf. 'losing face'). Your public image.
B&L proposed that face consists of two components:

Positive face: 'the want of every member that his [sic] wants be desirable to at least some others ... in particular, it includes the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired' (1987: 62).
E.g. you want me to acknowledge your existence (e.g. say 'Hello'), approve of your opinions (e.g. 'You're right about that tutor'), or express admiration (e.g. 'I thought you did a good job')

Negative face: 'the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others' (1987: 62).
E.g. you want me to let you attend to what you want, do what you want, and say what you want.

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

Acts such as requests and criticisms are face threatening acts (FTAs).

B&L (1987: 74-8) argue that the determination of how face threatening an act is and thus how much politeness is needed to redress it involves three sociological variables:

- **social distance** between participants,
- **relative power** of the hearer over the speaker, and
- **absolute ranking** of the imposition involved of in the act

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

So, for example:

- asking a new colleague for a cup of tea is more face threatening than asking a long standing colleague (the distance variable);
- asking one's employer for a cup of tea is more face threatening than asking a colleague (the power variable);
and
- asking for a glass of vintage port is more face threatening than asking for a glass of water (the ranking variable).

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

B&L propose 5 pragmatic superstrategies, each with specific linguistic output features. The more serious the FTA you need to redress is, the more 'polite' your superstrategy will need to be (i.e. it'll be further down the list below).

(1) **BALD ON RECORD**: Performs the FTA efficiently in a direct, concise, and perspicuous manner.

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(2) **POSITIVE POLITENESS**: Sugar the pill (i.e. FTA) by attending to the hearer's positive face wants. Includes: paying attention to the hearer ('Hello'), expressing interest, approval or sympathy ('That was so awful, my heart bled for you'), using in-group identity markers ('Liz, darling,...'), seeking agreement ('Nice weather today'), etc.

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

(3) NEGATIVE POLITENESS: Soften the blow (i.e. FTA) by attending to the hearer's negative face wants. Includes: mollifying the force of an utterance with questions and hedges ('Actually, I wondered if you could help?'), being pessimistic ('I don't suppose there would be any chance of a cup of tea?'), giving deference i.e. treating the addressee as a superior and thereby emphasizing rights to immunity ('I've been a real fool, could you help me out?'), etc.

.....

OFF-RECORD: Performs the FTA in such a way that one can avoid responsibility for performing it (i.e. hint).

DON'T DO THE FTA: Refrain from performing the FTA because it is so serious.

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

Applied to health discourse

[Context: An interview at a family planning clinic in the USA. CR is a 'counsellor', who interviews clients before they see the doctor. CL is a client, who is pregnant.]

CR: [...] Have you ever thought about discontinuing smoking?

CL: I've thought about it (*laughs*)

CR: Do you think you'd be able to do it?

CL: I don't know (*laughs*). I guess if I really wanted to ... I've been smoking for a long time
[...]

A face-based model: B&L (1987) (contd.)

CR: well. you know its not easy. cause everybody.
well I've got my bad habits too. so I know it's not
easy.. I smoked for eight years too so I know it's
not easy.

CT: Did you quit?

CR: yeah.

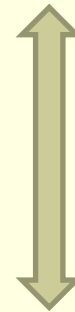
Indirectness and politeness: A theoretical scale?

I can't hear myself think (**off-record**)

Could you be quiet? (**negative politeness**)

Be quiet (**bald on record**)

Indirect + polite



Direct + polite

Indirectness and politeness: A theoretical scale?

But :

- (In)directness can be used for other purposes, e.g. humour. It need not be motivated by politeness.
- The scale may partly reflect a British cultural perspective, at least with regard to some parts of the scale.

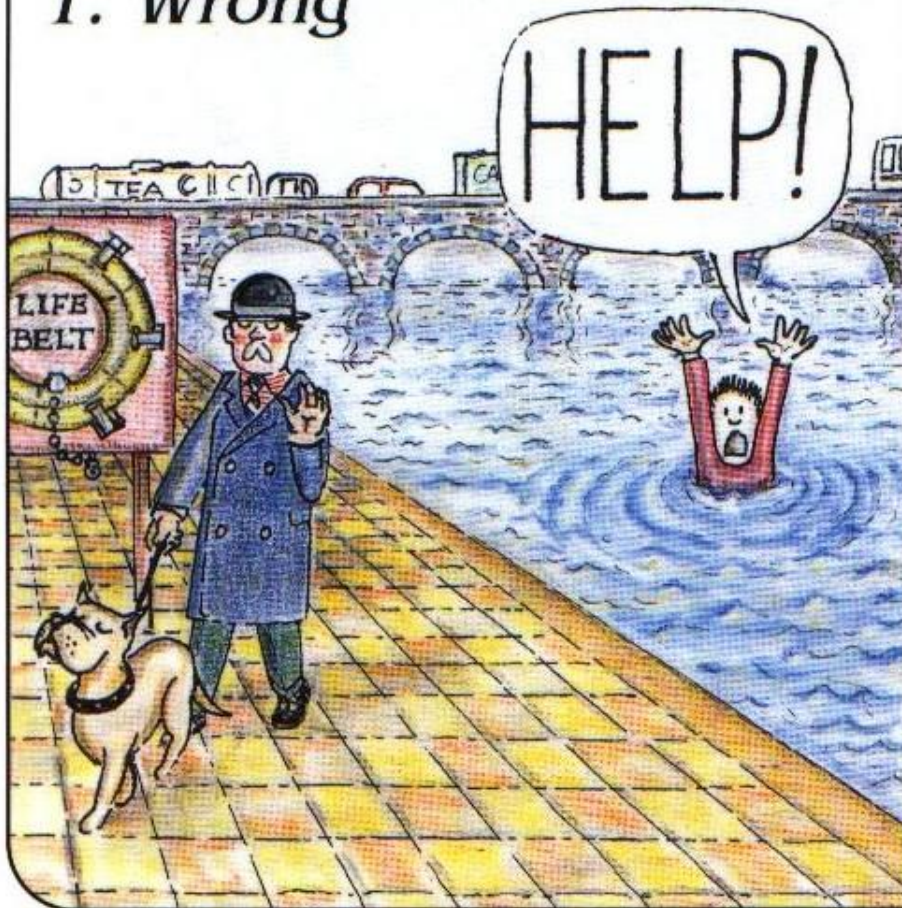
Indirectness and politeness: Cross-cultural variation

Get
around in

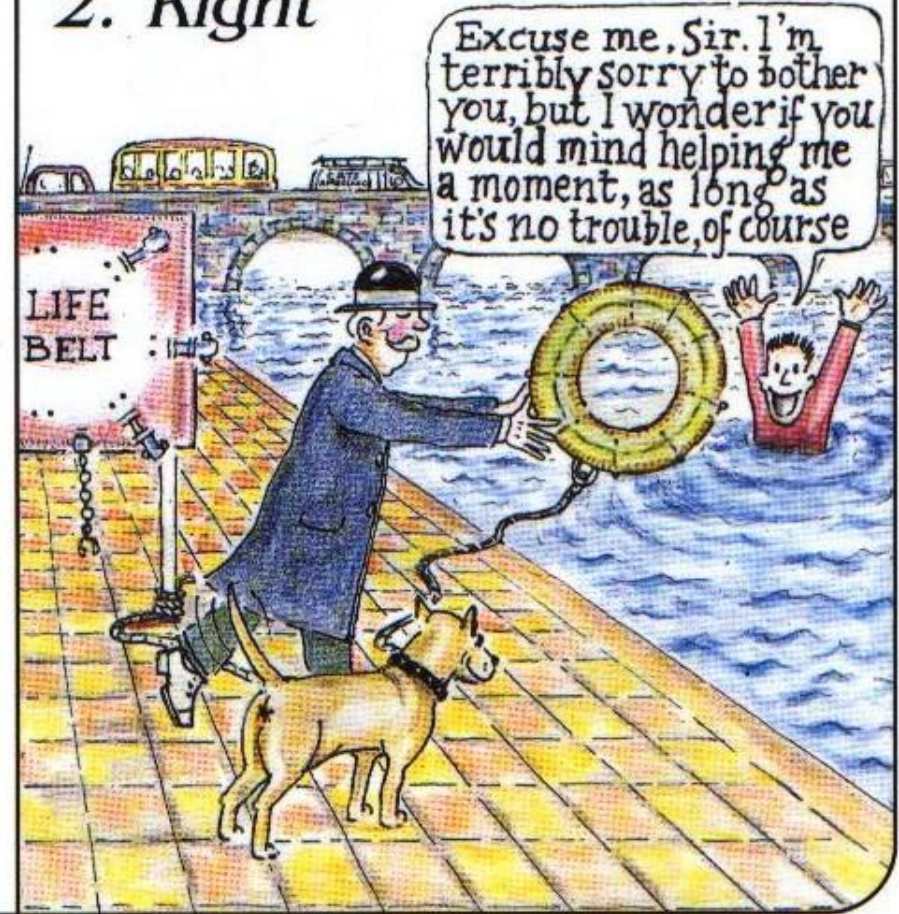
ENGLISH

Lesson Twenty Five
How to be Polite

1. Wrong



2. Right



Indirectness and politeness: Cross-cultural variation (contd.)

The *Cross Cultural Speech Act Realisation Patterns* project (cf. Blum Kulka et al. 1989). Languages/cultures = Brit. English, Amer. English, Aust. English, Hebrew, Danish, German, Russian, Canadian French, Argentinian Spanish. Looked at requests and apologies. Various situations. Between 94 and 227 informants per language.

Findings: all cultures use more conventional requests involving negative politeness (e.g. “could you pass me the salt?”) than other types; bald on record direct requests are least frequently used by the English; but no culture uses hints with any great frequency.

Different cultural conventions and belief systems

So what is impoliteness?

Involves:

Language or behaviours which are negatively evaluated in a particular context

They are negatively evaluated because they attack somebody's face (identity or rights).

They cause specific emotional reactions (e.g. hurt, anger)

Indirectness and politeness: A theoretical scale?

Indirect + polite

I can't hear myself think

Could you be quiet?

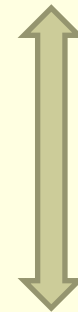
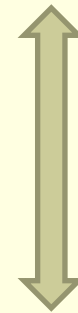
Be quiet.

Direct + polite/impolite

Will you shut up?

Does anybody know how to strangle a braying donkey?

Indirect + impolite



What are the most frequent ways in which somebody is impolite?

Vocatives

moron / plonker / dickhead / etc.

[you] [[fucking / rotten/ dirty / fat / etc.] [burk / pig / shit / bastard/ loser / etc.]] [you]

Personal negative evaluations

you're [nuts / nuttier than a fruit cake / hopeless / pathetic / stupid etc.]

you can't do anything right

What are the most frequent ways in which somebody is impolite?(contd.)

Dismissals

get [lost / out]

[fuck / piss] off

Silencers

shut [it / your mouth, face / etc.]

shut [the fuck] up

Threats

[I'll / I'm /we're] [gonna] [smash your face in / beat the shit out of you / box your ears / bust your fucking head off / etc.]

And there are, of course, more indirect ways of being impolite

As I walked over to the table to collect the glasses, Sam said to Aiden 'come on Aiden lets go outside', implying she didn't want me there. This was at the pub on Sunday night, and I just let the glasses go and walked away.

I didn't particularly feel bad, but angry at the way she had said that straight away when I got there. We aren't particularly friends but she was really rude in front of others.

And there are, of course, more indirect ways of being impolite (contd.)

Sarcasm

[Letter in Lancaster University's electronic staff bulletin]

I would just like to say thank you to the person who backed into my car on the perimeter road yesterday. It was a wonderful surprise when I'd finished work and made my way back to my car. [...] As a single parent and part-time member of staff on a clerical grade, I look forward to receiving an obscene quote from my local garage and then not eating for a week! Thank you SO VERY MUCH.

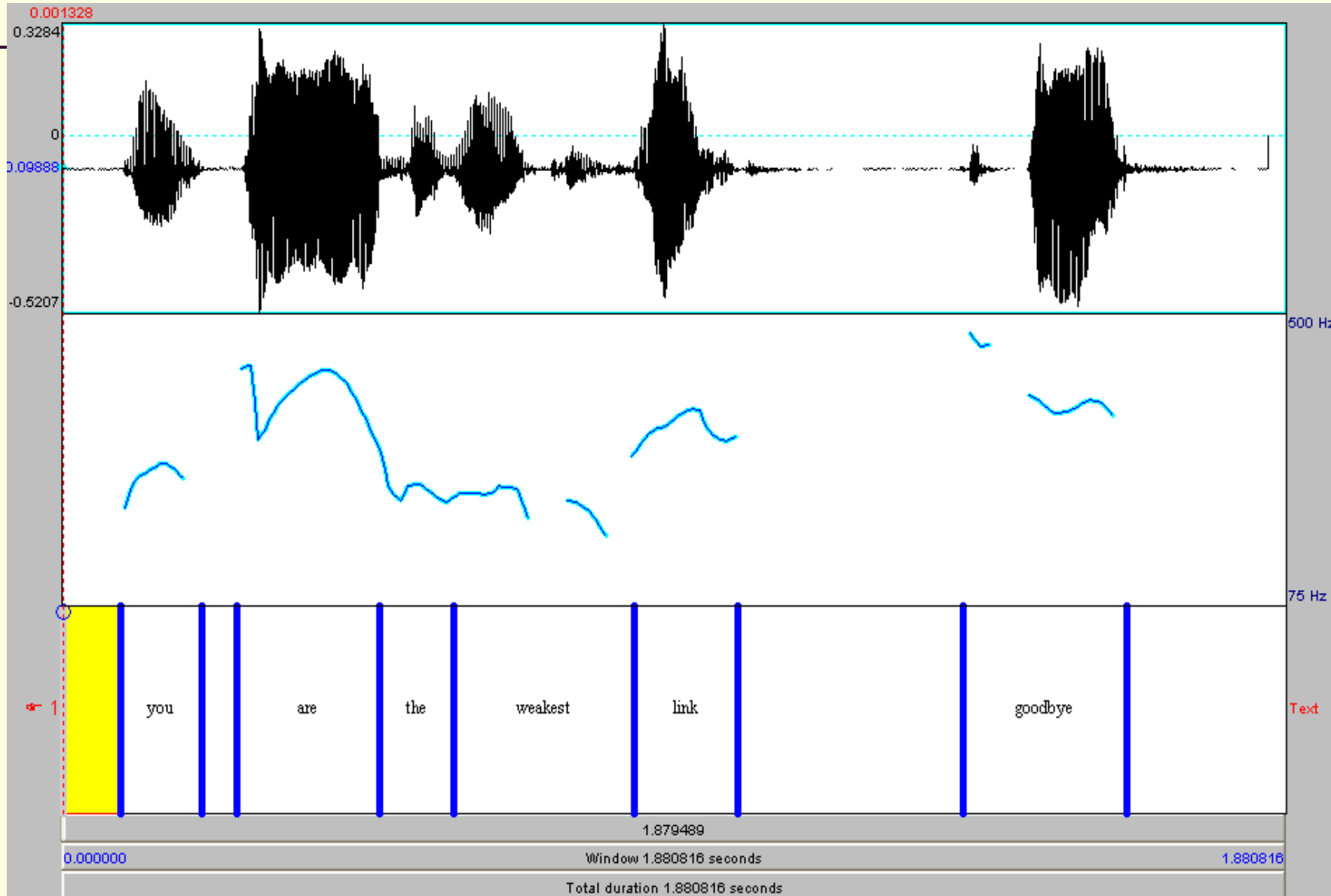
The importance of sound

Anne Robinson in *The Weakest Link*

you are the weakest link goodbye



The importance of sound (contd.)



The importance of context

Some words and behaviours are generally “ok”
(expected and accepted) in context.

Imagine a context for this:

Oh shit!

Impoliteness and the importance of context

[Lawrence Dallaglio, former England Rugby captain, describing the very close family he grew up in]

As Francesca and John left the house, she came back to give Mum a kiss and they said goodbye in the way they often did. “Bye, you bitch,” Francesca said. “Get out of here, go on, you bitch,” replied Mum. (*It's in the blood: My life*, 2007)

Pop Idol: Susie's performance

F: I think you looked great when you walked in

SU: thank you

F: you have lips every man wants to kiss

SU: *[laugh]*

F: but you've got a great voice

SU: oh thank you

F: I felt a bit of a tingle there

N: you've got your own style, you've got your own look, lovely lovely voice

SU: oh thank you

Compliment + receipt (i.e. thanks)

Non-verbal signals (e.g. Susie's smiles)

Pop Idol: Susie's performance (contd.)

P: I must be hearing an apparition here, cos I don't see any
of this

SU: oh

Strong disagreement with positive assessment (implied negative assessment = implicated impoliteness; note 'any') + Susie's 'oh' with falling intonation (receipt of face-attack)

Pop Idol: Susie's performance (contd.)

- 1) P: you said in the warm up it was your craziest dream
- 2) SU: it is
- 3) P: yeah that's what I think it is too a craziest dream, I don't see it at all, it was an uninspired vocal, bored me, just nothing about it, it was lifeless
- 4) SU: really
- 5) P: yeah

- (1) P exploits indeterminate meaning of 'craziest dream' + (3) stacks up impolite beliefs = implies she was extremely bad (implicated impoliteness). Note Susie bites lip.
- (3) P uses prosody to reinforce his boredom.
- (4) Seeks confirmation of negative assessment
- (5) Confirms negative assessment (situated impoliteness)

Pop Idol: Susie's performance – important points

- The impoliteness impact of P's talk is maximised by the prior polite talk. It sets up politeness expectations which are then smashed. (Im)politeness must always be examined in the context of the whole discourse.
- Susie is not a passive participant, but actively demonstrates that she has taken offence – she confirms the existence of impoliteness. Impoliteness is not just what the speaker does.
- Implied impoliteness (i.e. off-record impoliteness) is a favourite strategy (as it is with the Weakest Link). Impoliteness is not simplistic here, but creative.

Brief concluding remarks

- The study of politeness and impoliteness is essential to the study of social interactions.
- (Im)politeness connects aspects of identity, social contexts and linguistic forms.
- Classic accounts of politeness have generally underestimated the role of the “target”, vocal aspects and visual aspects.
- The language of impoliteness is worth studying because it is poorly understood, means a lot to people, and is not – or need not be – simplistic.

Key readings

Short overview: Culpeper, J. (2009) Politeness in interaction. In: Culpeper, J., Katamba, F., Kerswill, P., Wodak, R. and T. McEnery *English Language: Description, Variation and Context*. Palgrave, Chapter 31.

Long overview: Culpeper, J. (2011) Politeness and Impoliteness. In: Karin Aijmer and Gisle Andersen *Pragmatics of Society*, Volume 5 of series *Handbooks of Pragmatics*, Mouton de Gruyter, 391-436

My impoliteness website:

<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/projects/impoliteness/>