Introduction

To know your language well, you need to know the rules about how to use it, including, naturally, politeness (and rudeness) in language use. Sometimes it is very important to be polite, such as when you want to request something of someone or make a good impression on a first date or in a job interview. Politeness is useful in these kinds of situations because, among other things, it smoothes social interactions, it helps to avoid confrontational situations, it shows respect for the other person, and it can enable us to get what we want without the other person feeling as if we have imposed upon her.

Not surprisingly, knowing about politeness is also important for the language learner. As discussed in the previous chapter, the norms underlying social phenomena like politeness are determined by a given culture based on assumptions about what it means to be polite in that society. As a result, the way people express politeness differs from culture to culture. Mastering another language and knowing how to use it require an understanding of the cultural differences between your own culture and that of the language you are learning. This necessarily means that understanding the rules governing politeness is very important.

In fact, research suggests that native speakers are generally quite tolerant of mistakes in the speech of foreigners relating to pronunciation, word formation, and word order. But when foreigners violate norms relating to language usage, such as politeness, native speakers may interpret the behavior as bad manners. Here’s an illustration from English and Greek. In English, politeness is closely tied to formality, while in Greek this is not the case. One result of the differences may be that since Greeks are not as formal in their
social interactions, an English speaker might be led to view a Greek speaker as impolite. By contrast, Greeks might judge an English speaker as too formal and distant rather than polite.

To restate a familiar point: learning a language involves more than learning sounds, words, and sentences. It is also important to learn the rules of language usage. When it comes to politeness, you can learn to show respect for and cooperation with the person you are interacting with, or you can insult the person, even unintentionally. At least if you know the rules, you can actually choose how you want to treat people!

In this chapter we will start by getting a better understanding of how politeness is expressed in American English. With this as a basis, we will look at some other cultures and see how they differ from ours in terms of the nature of politeness and the strategies used to express it.

**Solidarity and Deference**

One way of looking at politeness is to consider its functions in a culture. According to P. Brown and S. Levinson (1987), the functions of politeness generally fall into one of two categories: **positive politeness** and **negative politeness**. In positive politeness, the speaker tries to treat the listener as a friend or at least to include him in the conversation. Positive politeness is used as a way of emphasizing **solidarity** with another person. Compliments are an example of this type of politeness. Another example of positive politeness is to go beyond a simple ‘Hi’ when you meet people. You may ask them about their family, about a recent trip they took, or about some other subject that they are interested in. A goal of this type of politeness is to make the person feel closer to you, that is, to emphasize solidarity between the two of you.

While positive politeness encourages **solidarity**, negative politeness emphasizes **deference**. By deference we are referring to a type of courteous respect, or the act of yielding to the opinion of another person. We might want to do this to preserve the other person’s self-respect or to avoid making her feel bad. Suppose a friend asks you if you like her new shirt. You may tell her that you do, even though you think the shirt is completely hideous. This is a type of negative politeness since you are being polite so as not to hurt the other person’s feelings. Another reason to use negative politeness might be to show respect. Responding to a dinner invitation by saying *I would be honored to come to dinner* rather than *I’ll come to dinner* is one way of showing negative politeness.

Negative politeness is also used in situations to give the impression of not imposing upon the other person too much, e.g. *If it is not too much trouble* . . . Or you might use negative politeness to create or maintain distance between you and the person you are talking to. Impersonal expressions are commonly used to achieve this goal. For example, a salesclerk, trying to be polite to a pushy customer, might say the following: *Sir, customers need to line up to the right of the counter.*
In general, politeness strategies in a language fall on a continuum, with solidarity at one end and deference at the other.

**Expressing Politeness in English**

Many different strategies are used in English to express politeness, including the use of questions, modal verbs, tag questions, and past tense, among others.

Framing a request in the form of a question tends to soften the impact of the request. Compare the two sentences in (1). Most English speakers would probably agree that the sentence in (b) is more polite than the one in (a):

(1)  
   a. Give me $35 for the football tickets.  
   b. Can I have $35 for the football tickets?

Use of the *modal verb* *can* in sentence (1b) is also contributing to the politeness. Other modal verbs include *would*, *might*, and *must* and can also add politeness to a sentence.

A small question added to the end of a sentence, called a *tag question*, is an additional device used to convey politeness, as in the examples in (2).

(2) Leave it here, will you? vs. Leave it here.  
   You can do it, can’t you? vs. You can do it.

Another way to soften the impact of a sentence is to use a *hedge*. Examples include *I was sort of wondering if . . .*, *maybe if . . .*, *I think that . . .*, *would you mind if . . .*. These expressions add indirectness to a request or command; indirect utterances are generally perceived by English speakers as more polite than direct utterances.

Indirectness can also be achieved by prefacing a sentence with an *apology*, e.g. *Excuse me, but I was wondering if . . .*, *Sorry to trouble you but . . .*. *Diminutives* such as *little*, *small amount of*, *tiny* can also soften the impact of a request or command. Examples are given in (3).

(3) Could you give me a little milk?  
   I need a few minutes of your time to help me with something.

The expression *real quick* is also a popular expression used by speakers in some varieties of American English, especially young adults. It too can be interpreted as a type of diminutive, intended to attenuate or downplay the imposition that the request may have on the person being asked.

(4) Can you give me that real quick?

The choice of *verb tense* is also used to convey politeness in English, contributing,
once again, an indirectness to the sentence. Most speakers would likely judge the sentence in (5a) with the past tense verb were as more polite than the one in (5b) with the present tense are:

(5)  a. Were you looking for something?  
    b. Are you looking for something?

A final strategy worth mentioning is the use of pre-statements, again adding indirectness to a phrase as shown in the examples in (6).

(6)  a. You (pre-request): Do you have a minute?  
     Response: Sure, what's up?  
     You (actual request): Would you read over my homework for me?  

    b. You (pre-invitation): Are you going to be in town this weekend?  
     Response: Yup.  
     You (actual invitation): Do you want to go out to dinner?

In (6a) the request is softened by the pre-statement (or pre-request), while in (6b) a pre-invitation is used before the actual invitation. One of the functions of a pre-statement is to give the person being addressed an easy way to say no while at the same time preserving the self-respect of both the addressee and the person making the pre-statement. Pre-statements, then, are examples of negative politeness.

If you are a speaker of American English and are able to judge a particular sentence as more polite than another, you have learned the rules of politeness in your culture, as well as the different strategies used to convey politeness.

In addition to the particular device used to express politeness, there are many factors that need to be taken into account in order to know when politeness is in order. Age, for example, is a common consideration. Is the person you are addressing older than you or younger than you? The social distance between you and the other person, the context in which the interaction occurs, and your familiarity with the other person may all be relevant. In addition, the urgency of the message also factors in. For example, the command Get away from there! would probably not be interpreted as being rude and

**Exercise 1: Politeness**

Think of ten or more ways to get someone to turn down loud music. Rank them in order of decreasing politeness. What factors seem to make the more polite versions more polite, and the ruder versions ruder?
offensive when yelled by a firefighter trying to keep you away from a car that is about to explode compared to its being yelled in some less urgent situation.

If you are able to determine, based on these kinds of factors, how polite you would need to be in a given situation, you have been successful in acquiring an amazing amount of information regarding the use of English in social interactions. First do Exercise 1 in the box at the bottom of p. 197. Then we will consider how other cultures may differ from ours in expressing politeness.

Politeness across Cultures

In this section we focus on three ways that languages differ from English in expressing politeness. The first involves situations in which the same type of politeness strategy is used, but the responses to the strategy differ in the two cultures. In the second, the same type of politeness is conveyed in different ways among different language varieties. And finally, we touch upon cases in which politeness has become an integral part of the language’s grammar.

SIMILAR STRATEGY, DIFFERENT RESPONSE

The use of compliments and requests is a fruitful area of study to discover differences among cultures. Comparative studies of politeness between Chinese and American speakers, and between Japanese and American speakers, have shown that while both cultures use negative and positive politeness strategies, their responses to compliments and requests are quite different. In both cultures, compliments are recognized as compliments and requests are recognized as requests. What differs is the way that speakers are expected to respond.

R. Chen (1993), for example, found that Chinese speakers frequently responded to compliments either by rejecting the compliment completely or by thanking the speaker and then denigrating or putting themselves down. Results of this survey are shown in (7).

(7) Differences in American English Speakers and Chinese Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American:</th>
<th>Chinese:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accepting the compliment</td>
<td>Yes (39.3%)</td>
<td>Yes (1.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning the compliment</td>
<td>Yes (18.5%)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking and denigrating</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes (3.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deflecting</td>
<td>Yes (29.5%)</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejecting the compliment</td>
<td>Yes (12.7%)</td>
<td>Yes (95.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. R. Chen, “Responding to Compliments,” 1993, pp. 49–75.
You can see that Americans accepted a compliment about 39% of the time compared to 1% for the Chinese participants. Americans were also more likely to return a compliment than Chinese. While the Chinese speakers thanked the person for the compliment and then put themselves down about 3% of the time, their overwhelming response was to completely reject the compliment.

To illustrate, consider the example where someone says, “Wow, you look absolutely fantastic in that outfit!” A typical American response would be along the lines of “Thanks” (39.3%), “You look good too!” (18.5%), or “Really? I think it makes me look like a dork” (12.7%). For Chinese, by contrast, the first two responses would be either nonexistent or very rare. Rather, while they might say something like “Thanks, I really do not deserve to wear such nice clothes” (3.4%), a response such as “Really? I think it makes me look stupid” would occur an astonishing 95.7% of the time. This difference appears to be related to social value differences between the two cultures, particularly in their respective beliefs regarding what constitutes self-image (Hondo and Goodman 2001).

Japanese speakers respond similarly to the Chinese. A study by M. Daikuhara (1986) found that 95% of Japanese responses to compliments were “self-praise avoidance,” and only 5% showed appreciation. By contrast, “thank you” was the most frequent response for Americans. It is interesting that Daikuhara also found that Japanese speakers rarely compliment their own families, while it is not uncommon for Americans to do so. Junko Hondo and Bridget Goodman (2001) suggest that this could be an indication of the function of downgrading oneself in Japanese culture, since in Japan the family is often considered to be a part of one’s self.

It is not hard to imagine how miscommunications could arise because a speaker of one language is not familiar with the ways in which compliments are interpreted in the other language. Hondo and Goodman give a few examples. The first one involves an American speaker giving a compliment to a Japanese speaker. The American says: “Your

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**Exercise 2: Giving a Compliment**

In the United States people tend to be very much aware of how they look, and they want others to think that they look good. What sort of relationship could be assumed between you and another person in order for each of the following to be appropriate?

a. You look nice.
b. You are very nice-looking.
c. You look great—have you lost weight?
d. That hat looks great on you!
e. I’ve never seen you looking so good.
f. I like the way you look.

What determines what you would say to someone else?
child is one smart girl,” by which she means exactly what she says: the girl is smart. The Japanese speaker replies: “Oh, no, she is not.” She says this because she has learned in her culture that it is not good to praise one’s own child too much. The result is that the American is left thinking that the Japanese woman does not think her own child is very smart.

In the second scenario, a Japanese woman gives a compliment to an American. She says: “Your presentation last week was spectacular,” and she means it. The American does not really think her presentation was that great but does not want to argue, so she says: “Why, thank you.” Since in Japanese culture accepting a compliment is considered inappropriate, the Japanese speaker is left thinking that the American is full of herself; according to Japanese culture, the American should have said something like “No, it was awful” (Chen 1993).

These two examples show just how important it is to understand the rules of conversation of another language. Both miscommunications could have been avoided had the speakers been aware of and sensitive to cultural differences in their language usage.

THE NATURE OF A COMPLIMENT

We continue our look at compliments, turning to the nature of compliments and some additional ways in which languages express politeness differently from English.

Interestingly, the focus and content of a compliment can differ from culture to culture. Egyptians, for example, tend to offer compliments about a person’s appearance and personal traits, but not about what the person does or has (Nelson, Bakary, and Batal 1993). They do so apparently to avoid harm caused by the “evil eye”: when seeing something attractive and beautiful belonging to someone else, one must say “God preserve you from the evil eye.” If not, something bad could happen to the owner of the beautiful object.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Farsi speakers use other culture-specific devices to express politeness (Akbari 2002). Many speakers, mostly older or uneducated ones, use positive politeness strategies that are rooted in religious beliefs, such as “if God wishes” and “God preserve you from the evil eye.” Referring to God when making a request is based on the belief that if they are talking about doing something in the future, they must say “if God wishes”; otherwise they will not be able to do it when they intend to.

The study also found that “prayers” are used by a speaker to encourage the listener to do something for her. Zahra Akbari (2002) gives the following example of a mother asking her daughter to do her a favor: “My dear daughter, may your life be blessed. Would you please hang these clothes up upstairs? My legs hurt and I cannot go up the stairs.”

While compliments are strongly influenced by religion in Arab cultures, at least one type of compliment in Hispanic culture is influenced by romance and art. These compliments, called píropos, are considered by some Spanish speakers to be a type of verbal artistry. According to Z. Moore (1996), píropos are commonly used by a young man toward a young woman. Some examples from Moore’s study are given in Table 11.1, with the cultural meanings added by Hondo and Goodman.
In American culture, there is a good chance that *piropos* would not be interpreted as compliments but instead as sexist—maybe even harassment. In Hispanic cultures, however, there is good reason to believe that they are intended to be compliments, since they can be said to children as well as adults. As Hondo and Goodman (2001) point out:

One Spanish speaker consulted in this regard pointed out that the phrase, “¡Vaya usted con Dios y su hija conmigo!” (“May you go with God and your daughter with me!”) may be uttered to a little child. . . . In that context, the statement is no more an invitation to sex than the American English expression to a child “he’s so cute I could just eat him up” is a display of cannibalistic tendencies.

The appropriate number of compliments can also differ from culture to culture. Egyptians tend to offer fewer compliments than Americans. The reason is, of course, cultural, related to the Arab belief in the “evil eye”: too many compliments can bring bad luck (Nelson, Bakary, and Batal). In North American culture, this could be viewed as similar to the “knock on wood” superstition.

### DIFFERENT RESPONSES TO REQUESTS

Languages also differ in the types of sentences used to express politeness. As we saw for English, questions are more polite than declaratives. This is not the case in all cultures, however. An interesting example comes from Wes Collins, an expert on the Mam

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2. Personal communication.
language of Guatemala. There are approximately 500,000 Mam speakers spanning five major dialects. While Wes was learning to speak Mam, he also learned, sometimes unintentionally, how his American culture differed from Mam culture. For example, when Wes was working in a Mam village, he asked his language consultant in what he thought was a polite manner, “Would you like some coffee?” Every time he asked this the language consultant just looked embarrassed and never quite knew what to say. When she did finally answer, she said, “Perhaps, yes.”

The reason for the Mam speaker’s hesitation is that Wes’s request was interpreted as “Is it possible that you might want some coffee at some point in the future?” This is because any reference to the future in Mam is cast in dubitative aspect, which associates doubt with a sentence. This reflects the belief in Mam culture that the future is unknowable. So if an English speaker asks a Mam speaker if she would like some coffee, she interprets it as meaning “at some point in the future.” How would she know how to answer such a question? As a result, the response is usually a simple “Perhaps, yes.” Since, for a Mam speaker, the future is in such doubt, it would be presumptuous to know the future and to assume that there would be coffee at some point in the future. Consequently, while Wes was using politeness strategies that he had learned in English, he was actually being rude. What Wes should have said was “Here, take this.” It is inconceivable that a Mam would be offered a cup of coffee and not accept it.

Greek and American cultures also differ in how one makes a request. In Greek society, imperative constructions, or commands, are appropriate forms for making a request in many more contexts than in American culture. In American culture, making a command is generally perceived as impolite. As a result, an American might interpret Greeks as “impolite” or “bossy.”

The Expression of Politeness in Grammar

In this section we look at additional examples where politeness has been encoded into the grammar. In these languages, different words are used to express degrees of politeness.

Many languages use different pronouns to express differences in respect, including French, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and German, to name a few. In French, for example, there are different forms of the second-person pronoun ‘you,’ as shown in (8).

(8) French ‘you’
   
   Singular, informal:      Tu vas au cinéma? ‘Are you going to the movies?’
   Plural; formal singular: Vous allez au cinéma? ‘Are you going to the movies?’

In very general terms, the singular pronoun tu is used when talking with someone you know or someone who is younger than you, and in casual speech. The pronoun vous
is used if addressing someone you do not know or a superior, or if the situation is rather formal. The *vous* form is also used when referring to more than one person, regardless of how well you know the people or how formal the situation is. *Vous* is both singular and plural.

What happens if you use the wrong form? For instance, what if you are meeting your new girlfriend's or boyfriend's mother for the first time and you use the *tu* form? Let's just say that you probably would not make a very good first impression. In fact, you would probably be thought of as rude.

There is also a flip side to this. In some cultures, people do not really expect foreigners to master their language, so they are more sympathetic to the blunders that a non-native speaker might make. This apparently is the case with Russian. According to D. Offord (1996):

> There are particular advantages for the foreign student of Russian in deploying the correct formulae in a given situation. . . . Russians are aware of the difficulty of their language for the foreign student and have little expectation that a foreigner will speak it well, let alone that a foreigner would be sympathetic to their customs. . . . They therefore tend to be more impressed by and favourably disposed toward the foreigner who has mastered the intricacies of their language and is prepared to observe at least their linguistic customs than are perhaps the French toward foreign French-speakers. (179)

For the language learner, then, it can be a win-win situation to learn to try to use the appropriate forms in a given context. If you make a mistake, you will not be misperceived as rude, and you might even impress the people that you are speaking to!

It is therefore useful to know what the appropriate form is for a given situation. However, it is also important to keep in mind that the choice of which form is used to express familiarity or formality is arbitrary and can differ from culture to culture. We saw in French, for example, that the second-person singular is the familiar form, while the second-person plural is formal. In Italian, by contrast, the polite form is the third person, not the second person. So instead of saying “How do you do?” you would say “How does he do?” But both sentences would still be interpreted as meaning “How do you do?”

As seen above, English also uses grammatical devices to express politeness; the past tense can sometimes be perceived as more polite than the present tense. Some additional examples are given in (9).

(9) **More polite?** | **Less polite?**
---|---
Did you want something? | Do you want something?
I was thinking of borrowing your car. | I am thinking of borrowing your car.
I didn't understand what you were saying. | I do not understand what you are saying.
The differences between the sentences in (9) are very subtle, and not all speakers will have the same judgments. If, on the other hand, the differences between the two tenses were systematic and all instances of the past tense were always interpreted as more polite, we would say that politeness is an integral part of a particular word or phrase. In this sense, it has been grammaticalized, such as the *tu* vs. *vous* forms in French. That is, it is part of the rules governing the form and structure of words and sentences in the language. This is not the case in English. Instead, our strategies for expressing politeness are rules of language usage.

In some languages, the grammaticalization of politeness has been raised to an art form. This is the case in languages like Korean and Japanese where forms of language called honorifics are used to express different degrees of politeness and respect. An honorific is a type of prefix or suffix that is added to a word to show respect for the person you are talking to. Here is an example of the same sentence in Japanese, first without an honorific, and then with an honorific:

(10) **Without honorific:**

Yamada ga musuko to syokuzi o tanosinda.
Yamada son dinner enjoyed
'Yamada enjoyed dinner with his son.'

**With honorific:**

Yamada-san ga musuko-san to o-syokuzi o tanosim-are-ta.
yamada-HON son-HON HON-dinner enjoyed-HON
'Yamada enjoyed dinner with his son.'

In Japanese, there are different types of honorifics, and the one that you use depends on a number of different factors, including, for example, the social relationship between you and the person you are talking with, the place where the conversation is taking place, and the activity involved. According to Masayoshi Shibatani (1990), the honorific system “functions to indicate the relative social and psychological distance” between the speaker and the addressee. Every person has an “intuitive personal sphere,” and politeness is a way of managing the positions of other individuals with respect to this sphere (p. 380).

We can illustrate how this distance can vary through the use of spheres as shown in Figure 11.1. The size of the sphere indicates the social status of the two people, where the bigger sphere means higher social status, and the smaller indicates lower status. Note that age is a very important factor determining status: the older you are, the more status you have and the more respect you should be shown. Showing intimacy indicates your belief that the other person is within your sphere (and that you are in his or hers), while showing respect indicates your beliefs about the distance between the spheres, as well as your social levels relative to one another.

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Figure 11.1

Figure 11.2
One class of honorifics, or keigo as they are called in Japanese, is called sonkeigo, illustrated in Figure 11.2. This literally means ‘respect language’ and is used to raise the relative level of the person that you are talking to. Another one, called kenjōgo, means ‘humble language.’ It lowers the level of the speaker so that it makes the person talking seem more humble. A third type is called teineigo which generally means ‘polite language.’ It is used to raise the level of the speech as a whole (Hendry 1993).

The level of speech used is controlled in large part by the formality of the situation. Polite language is always used in formal situations. If a situation is informal, honorifics might not be used, but again it depends on the social relationship between the speaker and addressee, the topic under discussion, and so on. Just because a situation is informal does not mean that an honorific is not used!

We provide an example from Shibatani’s book (pp. 377–78), illustrating many different levels of politeness:

(11) a. Vulgar:
Ore aitu ni au yo.
I that fellow to meet
‘I'll see that fellow.’

b. Plain, informal:
Boku kare ni au yo.
I he to meet
‘I'll see him.’

c. Polite, informal:
Boku kare ni ai-masu yo.
I he to meet-POLITE
‘I'll see him.’

d. Polite, formal:
Watakusi kare ni ai-masu.
I he to meet-POLITE
‘I'll see him.’

e. Polite, formal, object honorific:
Watakusi kare ni o-ai-si-masu.
I he to HON-meet-POLITE
‘I'll see him.’

f. Polite, formal, object honorific, honorified ‘he’:
Watakusi ano kata ni o-ai-si-masu.
I that person to HON-meet-POLITE
‘I'll see that person.’ (lit. ‘yonder’)

g. Polite, formal, super object honorific, super-honorified ‘he’:
Watakusi ano o-kata ni o-me ni kakari-masu.
I that HON-person to HON-eye to involve-POLITE
'I'll see that person.' (lit. 'I'll be humbly involved in the eye's (seeing) that honorable yonder')

The expression in (11a) might be said by some drunken working-class men. The final particle yo means something like 'all right?' and adds to the informality of the sentence. The second sentence is also informal. The difference is that it is not vulgar. Note that although there are only two informal examples, there are at least five different levels of politeness. The level of respect and formality increases through the addition of politeness endings like -masu and honorifics like the prefix o-. The final, super-respectful sentence is especially interesting. Literally, it means 'I'll be humbly involved in the eye's (seeing) that honorable yonder,' though the actual translation is just an extremely polite and respectful way of saying "I'll see that person."

**Summary**

From this brief discussion of politeness across cultures, we hope that you can appreciate that how a particular culture shows respect and politeness is arbitrary. The norms are defined on a culture-to-culture basis. Note again that we say “culture,” not “language.” This, of course, is because different varieties of the same language can have different rules about politeness. In French Canada, for example, it is quite common for college students to refer to each other with the singular tu ‘you’ form even if they do not know each other. In Paris, however, a higher degree of formality is maintained, and vous ‘you’ is more commonly used for someone you do not know, even if that person is the same age and social class as you.

**References**


