# CHAPTER ONE

# POLITENESS RESEARCH FROM PAST TO FUTURE, WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE DISCURSIVE APPROACH

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## 1. Introduction

In this chapter I wish to revisit some of the early motivations for politeness research and link them to current developments and thoughts in the field. This will allow me to go back to the pragmatic turn and the 1970s when politeness research took off. The motivation for this journey is to better position the research approach which has been called the 'discursive approach to politeness' (e.g., Locher and Watts 2005, 2008) and to react to comments about our work. This chapter thus presents some theoretical insights into the research topic rather than presenting data analysis and hopes to add to the current discussions about politeness and impoliteness within a framework of the study of relational work.

Next to seminal work published during the last forty years, this chapter has been especially inspired by the work of Maria Sifianou ('Linguistic politeness: Laying the foundations'), Richard Watts ('Linguistic politeness theory and its aftermath: Recent research trails'), Shigeko Okamoto ('Politeness in East Asia') and Derek Bousfield ('Researching impoliteness and rudeness: Issues and definitions'), published in the *Handbook of Interpersonal Pragmatics* (2010), edited by Sage Lambert Graham and myself, and by the volume on *Discursive Approaches to Politeness*, edited by the linguistics politeness research group (2011). These contributions explicitly reflect on the development of research in this field and allow a critical view of both the by now classic approaches to politeness as well as the more modern additions. In what follows, I will briefly position the research interest of this paper, before briefly revisiting the early politeness frameworks by Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and Leech (1983). Next, I will move to the strands in more recent research,

then turn to the idea of relational work and the discursive approaches before ending with outlooks for further research.

## 2. Interpersonal Pragmatics: Positioning the Research Focus

In linguistics, topics such as politeness are traditionally based in the field of pragmatics. The pragmatic turn in research, which took place in the second half of the 20th century and was initiated by researchers such as Dell Hymes, John Austin and John Searle (Feller 2009: 6), was a reaction to the lack of the study of language in use in linguistics at the time. Most generally, these researchers shifted their attention from grammatical to communicative competence, and thus to actual language use and performance. The general hunch at the time was that,

> [j]ust as we invoke syntactic rules to determine whether a sentence is to be considered syntactically well- or ill-formed, and in what way it is ill-formed if it is, and to what extent, so we should like to have some kind of pragmatic rules, dictating whether an utterance is pragmatically well-formed or not, and the extent to which it deviates if it does. (Lakoff 1973: 296)

This search for 'pragmatic rules' is at the heart of the early approaches to politeness and deserves revisiting (see next section).

While there is no agreement on the scope of pragmatic research in the literature, the definition of pragmatics adopted here is that it is seen as

> a general functional perspective on (any aspect of) language, i.e. as an approach to language which takes into account the full complexity of its cognitive, social, and cultural (i.e. meaningful) functioning in the lives of human beings. (Verschueren 2009: 19, italics removed)

Within the broad research field of pragmatics, politeness also clearly has to do with the interpersonal side of language rather than the informational one. Following Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967: 54), "[e]very communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a metacommunication." In politeness research, the focus is not so much on *what* (informational aspect) is being said, than on *how* (relational aspect) it is being said and what effects the choices of the interlocutors create. As we shall see in section 3, early politeness research focused on studying linguistic behaviour that was aimed at maintaining social harmony, while more recent work also focuses on disruptive and aggressive behaviour, thus

taking the entire gamut of possible relational effects into account. The study of this 'relational work', i.e. "the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice" (Locher and Watts 2008: 96), is thus broader than the original politeness theories, but also overlaps to a great extent in its desire to add to the understanding of pragmatic knowledge of language users.

The term 'interpersonal pragmatics', which functions as a denominator for the field of research outlined in this chapter, is a perspective (and not an independent theory; cf. Verschueren's quote above) on language in use which particularly highlights the interpersonal aspect of communication: "[It] is used to designate examinations of the relational aspect of interactions between people that both affect and are affected by their understandings of culture, society, and their own and others' interpretations" (Locher and Graham 2010: 2).

## 3. Revisiting the Foundations of Politeness Research: Lakoff, Brown and Levinson, and Leech

In the wake of the pragmatic turn, researchers started to become interested in language variation that occurs for stylistic and expressive reasons. Observations of language in use showed that, while the message of an utterance might be the same (e.g., 'open the window'), the ways in which this message is conveyed can vary (e.g., 'please, would you be so kind as to open the window', 'it is cold in here'). This variation was considered to be non random and was discussed under the label 'politeness'. Three approaches to politeness can be defined as the most influential early theories: Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and Leech (1983). All of them were influenced by the idea of communicative competence introduced by Hymes (1972) and built on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP).

Drawing on her knowledge of American society in developing her ideas, Lakoff (1973) was the first to explicitly link pragmatic knowledge with politeness phenomena. She proposed two "Rules of pragmatic competence": "1. Be clear." and "2. Be polite." (Lakoff 1973: 296). The first rule corresponds to what Grice later called the Cooperative Principle[1], while "Be polite" could be further differentiated into: "1. Don't impose";

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[1] Lakoff refers to an early, unpublished version of the Cooperative Principle which was formulated as 'Rules of Conversation' in 1967 and was later published in 1975.

"2. Give options"; and "3. Make [alter] feel good – be friendly" (Lakoff 1973: 298). These rules could also be described with the terms distance, deference and camaraderie (Lakoff 1990: 37). Lakoff (1973: 298) argues that the rules can be in competition with each other: "Now sometimes two or more of these rules may be in effect together, reinforcing each other; just as often, we must make a choice – are we in a R1 or a R3 situation? – and one will cancel the other out." While Lakoff acknowledges that "what is polite for me may be rude for you" (Lakoff 1973: 303), she argues that the rules are present more globally, but can be more or less pronounced: "What I think happens, in case two cultures differ in their interpretation of the politeness of an action or an utterance, is that they have the same three rules, but different orders of precedence for these rules" (Lakoff 1973: 303). She identifies Europe as emphasizing distancing strategies, while Asia would favor deference and the US camaraderie. Lakoff's approach goes for a global picture and aims at identifying general rules that guide interaction. Her definition of politeness is thus free of context and reads as follows: "Politeness is a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange" (Lakoff 1990: 34).

Brown and Levinson's (1987) *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, first published in (1978), is clearly the best known and most followed theory of politeness to date. The authors claim that it was written during "the beginning of a confluence of interests in linguistics, anthropology and 'micro'-sociology" (1987: 2) and identify Speech Act Theory and transformational grammar as further sources of inspiration (1987: 10). As in the case of Lakoff, the theory is based on Gricean pragmatics. Brown and Levinson (1987) express an interest in the "relation between form and complex inference" (2) and cultural differences, and argue that "patterns of message construction, or 'ways of putting things', or simply language usage, are parts of the very stuff that social relationships are made of" (55). They thus explicitly highlight the relational aspect of communication by saying that they have an interest in "dyadic patterns of verbal interaction as the expression of social relationships" (1987: 2). Their study is empirical and based on a corpus of naturally-occurring, elicited and intuitive data of English, Tamil and Tzeltal, with a clear aim of looking for universals in pragmatic knowledge. As in the case of Lakoff's approach, this study thus aims at a general understanding of pragmatic competence.

The approach is based on a number of theoretical assumptions and key concepts. They propose the idea of a model person, who is characterized by rational means-ends behavior, and who possesses positive and negative

face. The concept of face is taken from Goffman's (1967) work[2] and defined in two parts: negative face and positive face. The former refers to the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [sic.] actions be unimpeded by others" and the latter to "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). The argument is that face is vulnerable and can be threatened by so-called face-threatening acts (FTAs). However, in order to maintain social harmony, social actors have an interest to "maintain each other's face" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 60): "Unless S's want to do an FTA with maximum efficiency [...] is greater than S's want to preserve H's (or S's) face to any degree, then S will want to minimize the face threat of the FTA" (1987: 60). This motivation for face-threat minimization is the key point of Brown and Levinson's theory. They propose that interactants estimate the risk of face loss in interaction and choose from a set of strategies, the pragmatic impact of which they know (hence the means-ends reasoning). The choice is between not doing the FTA at all; expressing it in an indirect way (off record); with mitigation expressing positive or negative face concern; or boldly on record. The choice of these strategies is determined in relation to the power difference and distance between the speaker and addressee, as well as the ranking of the imposition that needs mitigation in its cultural context.

After outlining the principle workings of their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) offer a catalogue of linguistic strategies that they observed in the three languages. For example, the super-strategy 'positive politeness' is argued to be instantiated by the following set of strategies: "Claim 'common ground'", "Convey that S and H are cooperators", "Fulfill H's want (for some X)". These strategies in turn are constituted by a further set of strategies, e.g., "Claim common point of view", which, at the lowest level of realization, results in 15 different strategies, e.g., "Seek agreement". In the same vein, they identify and document 10 strategies for negative politeness and discuss 15 strategies for off record politeness. No other theory of politeness has gone to this descriptive detail.

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[2] Goffman's (1967: 5) definition is: "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic.] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself." This concept is more dynamic than the one by Brown and Levinson (see section 5.1.).

While the politeness theory proposed by Brown and Levinson has received a number of important criticisms[3] that cannot be explored in detail here, it is worth pointing out that 'politeness' is seen as a universal concept and that it is used as a technical term to (mainly) describe mitigation. The generalizations proposed in the framework are at the cost of the local, situated meanings of 'politeness', since the perceptions and judgments of the interactants, i.e., whether they perceive the strategies as realizing 'politeness', are of no consequence. Overall, we can state that Brown and Levinson's work offers an extensive set of linguistic strategies as observed in the three languages. The advantage of this theory is thus that it gives researchers a clearly delineated set of tools to apply to new sets of data in an endeavour to understand the global patterns of pragmatic competence.

Leech's (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics* is another classic work that tackles the question of pragmatic competence and the study of language in use. Within the framework of his 'Interpersonal Rhetoric', Leech (1983: 80) considers the *Politeness Principle* (PP) to be working in close connection with Grice's CP and argues that the PP explains why the CP is often not followed in interaction. Interlocutors create meaning by exploiting the knowledge about the principles that both speakers and addressees possess. The PP is constituted by six maxims (Leech 1983: 132): the tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim and sympathy maxim. As in the case of Brown and Levinson, Leech refers to specific speech acts in his approach, identifies pragmatic scales that influence output (cost-benefit, optionality, indirectness[4]), argues that there is a means-ends reasoning on the part of the interactants and works on the "assumption that a maintenance of equilibrium is desirable" (Leech 1983: 125). In his 2007 version[5], Leech (2007: 173) identifies the PP as a 'constraint': "The Principle of Politeness (PP) – analogous to Grice's CP – is a constraint observed in human communicative behaviour, influencing us to avoid communicative discord or offence, and maintain communicative concord." By using the term 'constraint', Leech highlights the fact that politeness is seen as influencing the ways in which interactants phrase their utterances in order to achieve the mentioned aims of avoiding discord/offence and maintaining

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[3] Consult Sifianou (2010) and Watts (2010) for recent criticism of Brown and Levinson's (1987) work.
[4] In 2007, Leech adds "Strength of socially-defined rights and obligations" and "Self-territory" and "other-territory" (193–194).
[5] For reasons of space, the further changes to the PP and its position within Leech's Interpersonal Rhetoric cannot be discussed.

communicative concord. With respect to the question of universals, Leech (2007: 200) expresses himself cautiously in favour of arguing that the pragmatic scales "are very widespread in human societies, but their interpretation differs from society to society, just as their encoding differs from language to language."

Rather than plunging into a critique of the three early approaches to politeness, the main point here is to stress that all three set out to explain pragmatic rules / principles / constraints in an attempt to understand pragmatic competence more generally. The motivation for this work is to understand and observe language in use and to explain why interactants express themselves in different ways. This research aim needs to be seen in connection with the pragmatic turn and the interest of the protagonists to explain the underlying systematics of language use. To go back to Lakoff's (1973: 298) quote, the search for "pragmatic rules, dictating whether an utterance is pragmatically well-formed or not", has to be seen in the context of the search for the establishing of syntactic rules at the time. As a consequence of this research direction, the local and particular as well as the lay understanding of 'politeness' are not at the centre of attention. This has changed in later research as we shall see in the next section.

## 4. Newer Trends in Politeness Research Since the 1990s

The foundational theories on politeness mentioned in the previous section received an enormous echo in the research community. Well over a thousand papers have been published on the topic since the 1970s. Many of these publications apply the theories and reproduce the original studies. This is especially the case for work inspired by Brown and Levinson's framework. There are thus many studies that investigate different speech acts or compare the level of indirectness in different cultures. However, researchers did not only reproduce existing theoretical claims, since a number of alternatives to or developments of the current thoughts on politeness were also offered: the conversational-contract view proposed by Fraser and Nolan (1981) and Fraser (1990), which sees politeness as the norm that goes unnoticed; the view that sees politeness as marked surplus (e.g. Watts 1989, 1992), and the view that highlights the pro-social/involvement aspect of politeness and stresses that it is not just about mitigating face-threatening acts (e.g. Sifianou 1992; Holmes 1995). I can only point to these studies since it is beyond the scope of this paper to

review them all.[6] From the 1990s until today we can further make out three more trends: (1), a theoretical and methodological discussion on how best to approach politeness phenomena was launched, which brought up issues of universality once more and the notion of emic and etic understandings of the concept politeness; (2), the research scope was enlarged in that politeness researchers started to include face-aggressive behaviour into their scope of interest; (3), because the scope of research was broadened, there has been a rapprochement of research interests from fields such as social cognition, identity construction and politeness research since all are concerned with the interpersonal aspect of language use. These trends have widened the field considerably and have opened up avenues of research.

As outlined in the previous section, the early approaches to politeness research have to be understood in connection with the search for pragmatic rules that help understand language in use. For these reasons, the frameworks were designed in a broad way and the net was cast widely in order to grasp general trends that explain how interactants take social and contextual factors into account when talking. Power differences, social distance and affect between the interlocutors, the ranking of impositions as well as cultural norms were argued to influence language in use. The result of using language strategically in order to maintain a social balance was labelled 'politeness'. In the wake of these early approaches, however, the question came up whether 'politeness' is indeed the proper term for the described phenomenon. The development of conversation analysis, discourse analysis and interactional sociolinguistics highlights the particular, situated nature of interaction and demonstrates that, just as Lakoff already pointed out earlier, "what is polite for me may be rude for you" (Lakoff 1973: 303). Watts, Ehlich and Ide (1992) and Eelen (2001) point out that terms such as *impolite, rude, polite, polished* are in fact first order concepts, that is they are labels for judgments about behaviour that are made by the social actors themselves. For example, the link between politeness and indirect behaviour, which was at the heart of the frameworks put forward by both Brown and Levinson and Leech, may be an over-generalization, since indirectness can be understood as impolite rather than polite depending on the context the interactants find themselves in. It is also worth pointing out that two of the three early theories of politeness worked exclusively on English. As a result, lay understandings of what politeness or impoliteness is in English bear on the frameworks. This was noted early on by researchers working on Asian languages, who

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[6] For overviews, the reader is referred to Eelen (2001), Locher (2004) and Watts (2003; 2010).

proposed alternative concepts derived from their languages (reviewed in Okamoto 2010). The turn to a discussion of an emic understanding of politeness has again opened up the discussion of the relational aspect of communication more generally, and has highlighted that the early approaches use the concept 'politeness' as a technical term for linguistic analysis.

Another invigoration of the research field was brought about by those researchers who turned their attention to the study of impolite and rude behaviour. They have added to the current debate by enlarging the scope of research, moving away from a focus on mitigating behaviour to behaviour that is face-aggressive (e.g., early work by Lachenicht 1980; Culpeper 1996; Kienpointner 1997; Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003). By doing this, they point out that a theoretical approach to the interpersonal aspect of language in use should really be able to discuss face-maintaining, as well as face-enhancing and face-damaging behaviour. Studies on impoliteness and rudeness gained momentum in the 2000s and are carried out both within the first and the second order paradigm (Locher and Bousfield 2008; Bousfield and Culpeper 2008; Bousfield 2008; 2010).

Last but not least, today we can witness a rapprochement of the research fields of language and identity, social cognition, and politeness research. Spencer-Oatey (2005, 2007) speaks of 'rapport management', Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) of 'relational work', and Arundale (2010) of 'Face Constituting Theory', all of which include the study of politeness phenomena but are not restricted to them. The theoretical findings of researchers working on identity construction (e.g., Davies and Harré 1990; Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Locher 2008) are also concerned with interpersonal negotiations and thus of use to politeness researchers. In the next section one particular approach to interpersonal pragmatics will be looked at in more detail.

# 5. Relational Work and Politeness

Within work that has been discussed as 'the discursive approach to politeness', we can find quite a variety of different thoughts so that it is impossible to speak of a unified approach that could be summarized under this label (cf. Mills 2011). For example, Mills (2005) stresses the local, situated aspect of communication, Tracy (2008) and Hutchby (2008) remind us of the benefits of CA methodology, and Watts (2008, 2010b) highlights the cognitive dimension in the negotiation of social interests. As a common denominator we can name a focus on situated practices and the relational effects negotiated in interaction, as well as an interest in first

order understandings of language use. In what follows, I will restrict myself to an introduction to the study of 'relational work' as propagated by Richard Watts and myself (Watts; 1989, 1992, 2003, 2005; Locher and Watts 2005; 2008; Locher 2004, 2006, 2008). While this approach started with an interest in politeness phenomena, the study of relational work is much broader than this original focus. The theoretical thoughts presented here are in the process of being developed and are intended to add to the current debate.

## 5.1. Relational Work

As outlined in section 2, the notion of 'relational work' is "the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice" (Locher and Watts 2008: 96). The focus is thus on the relational and interpersonal side of communication and on the effects linguistic choices may have on relationships. The term relational work is used instead of facework, since the latter has often been employed in connection with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and has often been reduced to referring to mitigating behaviour only. Relational work, in contrast, refers to the entire gamut of interpersonal effects. We can speak of face-enhancing and face-maintaining behaviour as well as face-damaging, face-aggressive or face-challenging behaviour (Tracy 1990). These terms and concepts are intended to be of a theoretical, second-order nature and allow the researcher to theorize about the interpersonal side of language use without referring to more charged terminology such as 'polite' or 'impolite' (but see the comments below on the metaphor 'face'). The overall research aims within the study of relational work can be summarized as the wish to better understand how people create relational effects by means of language, comprehend how this process is embedded in its cultural and situated context, and recognize how this is interrelated with social and cognitive processes. These research aims are of a theoretical nature and resonate to the times of the pragmatic turn, in that the research motivation is identified as the wish of the scholar to contribute to the understanding of language in use, with a special emphasis on the interpersonal element of communication. In order to outline this field in more detail, some clarifications of premises and key concepts are in order. The approach acknowledges the dynamic and emergent nature of identity construction, highlights the situated nature of practices and relies on the concepts of 'face' and 'frame'. The latter term includes norms of

interaction, which include an understanding of participant roles that are themselves negotiated in interaction.

Starting with the individual, we work with the Goffmanian notion of 'face': "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he [sic.] has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967: 5). This concept is more dynamic than the Brown and Levinson definition of positive and negative face and highlights that face relies on the other interactants and their uptake of the 'line' that the interlocutors wish to project. This process goes beyond a mere encoding and decoding of face projections, as the process itself is dynamic and face is contestable and emergent.[7] This understanding of face also argues that there cannot be any communication where face concerns do not matter (Scollon and Scollon 2001). The concept of face has been criticized as being culturally charged and hence not suitable for an analysis of all languages (for overviews, see O'Driscoll 1996; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Spencer-Oatey 2005; 2007; Arundale 2006; Haugh 2007). In this paper 'face' is linked to identity construction and relational work, which allows us to read it as a metaphor which can be culturally filled at need. Face is here seen as a shorthand for the process of dynamically negotiating relationships in situ. Maintaining, enhancing or challenging face are fundamental activities that interactants engage in during their lives as social beings when negotiating relationships. We claim that relationships are dynamically constructed in interaction by the participants in specific, situated contexts. In this we follow an interactional sociolinguistics paradigm and can make the link to the study of identity construction (Locher 2008, and also Spencer-Oatey 2005, 2007). Identity is argued to be constructed in situ (rather than being pre-constituted) and is seen as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586; cf. also De Fina 2010) and as

> the active negotiation of an individual's relationship with larger social constructs, in so far as this negotiation is signaled through language and other semiotic means. Identity, then, is neither attribute nor possession, but an individual and collective-level process of semiosis. (Mendoza-Denton 2002: 475)

The study of relational work and identity construction are thus linked because of the focus on relationships and the interpersonal side of communication. How this is linked to politeness in turn will be outlined shortly.

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[7] In previous work (Watts 1991; Locher 2004), this dynamics was emphasized by drawing on the notion of 'emergent networks'.

Interactants do not negotiate interpersonal issues in a contextual void. Instead, they engage in situated activities and practices with each other. To study these we can draw on the notion of Community of Practice and on the cognitive concept of 'frame'. A Community of Practice (CofP) is "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour" (Eckert and McConell-Ginet 1992: 95). In the course of these practices relationships are being negotiated. People have an understanding of the roles that are tied to the practices they are engaging in and a tacit knowledge of what rights and obligations come with these roles. According to Tannen (1993: 53), this can be explained with the notion of frames, which are defined as "structures of expectation based on past experience". A CofP can be made up of more than one frame. For example, a team of office workers might regularly engage in routine desk work, and team meetings, but also coffee breaks and maybe after-work joint pastimes. For each of these activities within the CofP, the frame functions as a cognitive skeleton that structures expectations with respect to action sequences (e.g., rules of turn-taking), but also understandings of roles and the respective rights and obligations (e.g., boss and employee; chair person and committee members; husband and wife; parent and child). Frames have a cognitive dimension in that interactants acquire knowledge of them by means of socialization and draw on them in interaction. In a process of analogy people will, to a certain extent, also transfer expectations about norms of interaction from one frame to the next if the parameters are reasonably similar. Frames have a historical (personal life and cultural) dimension precisely because they are derived from past interactions and understandings of previous discourse. They are thus culturally embedded. It is worth stressing that, while frames and roles are cognitively retrievable, their enactment is dynamic and emergent.

The norms that are linked to CofPs and to particular frames are not static. Instead, we argue that they are dynamic and based on negotiations. This can easily be illustrated by a cursory glance over the written etiquette literature of the past decades, which contains meta-comments and reflections on proper conduct. What was deemed appropriate behaviour, i.e. behaviour adhering to the norms of groups of people, has changed quite dramatically over time. For example, the positioning of women in the bestseller *In Search of Charm* (Young 1962) is (hopefully) bound to strike present-day young women as entirely out of place, since the norms that are conveyed in this book do not reflect the values of their society any longer. In the same vein, tacit norms of conduct connected to any frame in

any CofP have the potential to change over time. In other words, norms may vary (from practice to practice), are culturally dependent, acquired over time and developed in social interaction.

Looking at the relational aspect of language use is a challenging and complex enterprise. It involves looking at the individual in his or her social, situated practice and the process of emergent identity construction. Clearly, the direction of research points toward taking on board findings from related fields of interest (socio-cognitive linguistics, work on identity construction and psychology) in order to zoom in on the relational aspect of language use. I posit that the concepts introduced in this section help the analyst approach data (see below).

## 5.2. Politeness as an Aspect of Relational Work

How can we link these ideas on relational work to politeness and impoliteness? The easiest entry point is via the notion of norms[8], which is of course also related to the understanding of roles and identity construction, and judgments of behaviour according to these norms. A term such as the English *polite* refers to the result of a judgment by an addressee in an interaction of how a particular person has conducted him or herself with respect to the norms of the current activity. In the same vein, it can be seen as a judgment by a speaker who wishes to project a polite identity when choosing a linguistic strategy for interpersonal effect. We are thus dealing with a first order understanding of what is considered *polite* in a certain context. Members of the same CofP are bound to come to fairly similar results in this judging process as they share (and develop) similar norms, while outsiders might have a different impression of the impact of the relational work employed. That there can be considerable disagreement over whether an utterance was polite or not is, for example, evident in the manifold discussions on proper conduct that people lead freely on the Internet (Locher and Watts 2008). What is seen as adequate relational work in social interaction is thus open to negotiation. This

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[8] Culpeper (2008: 30) argues that the notion of 'norms' needs to be further developed and suggests a potential differentiation into "*Personal norms* based on the totality of X's social experiences"; "*Cultural norms* based on the totality of X's experiences of a particular culture"; "*Situational norms* based on the totality of X's experiences of a particular situation in a particular culture"; and "*Co-textual norms* based on the totality of X's experience of a particular interaction in a particular situation in a particular culture." To what extent these different types of norms overlap and to what extent the differentiations prove useful for analysis still has to be explored.

struggle over the meaning of the concepts by lay people has been labelled 'discursive' in the literature.

Knowledge of norms is key to an understanding of the impact of a linguistic choice for its interpersonal effect. Interactants indeed may pursue different aims. In relation to face-aggressive behaviour, Lachenicht (1980: 619–620) maintains that "[i]f the purpose of aggravation is to hurt, then means must be chosen that *will* hurt" (emphasis in original). This points to the fact that interlocutors need to know the norms of a practice in judging what behaviour will no longer be within an acceptable range if they wish to damage the other's face. Judging others and being aware of the fact that one is being judged with respect to one's behaviour allows us to make the link between identity construction and notions such as politeness or impoliteness: If you want to be perceived as *polite, considerate, well-mannered*, etc., you also have to adjust your relational work to the norms of the practice in question, so that you increase the likelihood that this desired impression is made. (It is worth pointing out that, in this approach, *polite* is only one of many possible lexemes in the English language that interactants might choose to describe effects of relational work,[9] in contrast to the early approaches to politeness that use the term as a technical concept.)

In previous work, Watts (1989, 1992) introduced the notion of marked linguistic behaviour to the discussion of politeness. This concept helps to explain that some lexemes are positively or negatively charged and that some may be neutral:

> Negatively marked behaviour, i.e. behaviour that has breached a social norm ..., evokes negative evaluations such as *impolite* or *over-polite*, (or any alternative lexeme such as *rude, aggressive, insulting, sarcastic,* etc. depending upon the degree of the violation and the type of conceptualization the inappropriate behaviour is profiled against). (Locher and Watts 2008: 79)

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[9] Haugh (2007: 300) argues that Locher and Watts (2005) propose a four-partite distinction of relational work ('impolite', 'non-polite', 'polite', 'over-polite'). This is a misunderstanding in so far as we would argue there are many more first order judgments that interactants employ. The four lexemes were chosen as possible examples to show how assessments might differ along the lines of positive and negative markedness. However, Haugh is right in arguing that more work needs to be done in elaborating these processes.

Lexemes such as *polite, polished, refined* often seem to have a positive value[10] in English, while there are also more neutral judgments such as *appropriate* or *normal*. This also shows that relational work cannot simply be divided into impolite and polite behaviour (as it is conceptualised in the Brown and Levinson framework[11]). There are many evaluative lexemes that refer to relational work and that have semantic fields which overlap at times.

When interested in understanding the lexemes, we also have to pay attention to the fact that we are dealing with particular languages. For example, there is a discussion in the literature at the moment that spends considerable effort on trying to differentiate between *rudeness* and *impoliteness* (Bousfield 2008, 2010; Culpeper 2008; Terkourafi 2008), arguing that whether behaviour is recognized as intentional or not might be the key to differentiate between the terms. While it is of course worthwhile to pursue the notion of intentions in the definition of first order concepts, the researchers have to be careful that they are not misunderstood as describing universal differences in linguistic behaviour that can easily be transferred to other cultures as well. At least in the case of German (and there might be other languages), it is hard to find an equivalent translation for the concept of 'rudeness'. It may thus be the case that the fine-grained distinctions between the English terms might turn out to be of hardly any analytical use when looking at other languages. However, if we consider the discussion as a contribution to how the lexemes differ in *English*, the findings remain of interest.

Finally, it is also important to point out that the process of judging is not neutral and detached. On the contrary, since these evaluations are made in relation to what a social being considers to be his or her rights and obligations with respect to a particular emergent role, emotions and affect will also play an important part (Locher and Langlotz 2008). This intersection of cognition, interaction and emotion needs further exploration. In recent times, the cognitive side of the judging processes has begun to be explored by drawing on conceptual blending theory (Watts 2008; 2010b) and prototype theory (Watts 2008, Bousfield 2010).

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[10] See Mills (2002, 2005), who points out that the term *polite* can have negative connotations in Britain, depending on your class background. Haugh (2007: 299–300) reports further variation in definitions of *politeness* by English native speakers. It seems to me that the notion of markedness can be upheld since politeness does not appear to refer to behavior that is neutral or goes unnoticed.

[11] Brown and Levinson (1987: 5) argue that "politeness has to be communicated, and the absence of communicated politeness may, *ceteris paribus*, be taken as the absence of a polite attitude."

To summarize, polite behaviour is only one part of relational work. Whether behaviour is deemed *polite* depends on locally made judgments on the relational aspects of language usage. These judgments are made with respect to the norms of interaction that are tied to the current activity. Politeness research can contribute to the understanding of the negotiation of relational aspects and effects, as can research on impoliteness or other aspects of relational work. It is also suggested that the use of theoretical terminology such as face-enhancing, face-maintaining, face-damaging, face-aggressive or face-challenging behaviour may be a way for scholars to describe language use without drawing on first order labels themselves (see comments above on the problematic of the concept 'face').

## 5.3. Critical Points and Responses to Them

Throughout the last couple of years, discussions about how best to approach politeness and impoliteness phenomena have been conducted in journal articles, monographs, edited collections, but importantly also in face-to face conversations at conferences. The discursive approach to politeness has received a number of critical assessments (e.g., Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Haugh 2007; Bousfield 2010). In what follows, I paraphrase and discuss a number of selected points of criticism and questions that have come up over the years, often in informal contexts.

*Claim:* The discursive approach to politeness (Locher/Watts) is no longer interested in politeness. *Response:* This depends on your research question. The study of relational work surely does not exclude the study of politeness. The entire spectrum of relational work is taken into consideration and deemed interesting for research. Aspects of politeness still play an important role, but are no longer the exclusive centre of attention, since other first order judgments, such as *impolite, rude, polished*, etc. may equally trigger the interest of the researcher. Research carried out within the discursive approach is therefore interested in how interactants manage the relational aspect of communication. For this more global research aim the label 'relational work' is being used as a theoretical concept and technical terms such as face-enhancing, face-maintaining, or face-damaging behaviour allow the researcher to approach the data in a more detached way. At the same time, the focus can still be on finding out what constitutes 'politeness' (in a first order sense) in a particular practice.

*Claim:* Lakoff's, Brown and Levinson's and Leech's work can no longer be used and should be dismissed. *Response:* It depends on the purpose of your investigation. For example, Brown and Levinson have

done pioneering work in describing strategies for linguistic mitigation and Leech has described norms of linguistic behaviour for English people in the sense that he formulated cultural constraints that people orient to. If you are interested in studying indirectness or a potential orientation to the constraints proposed by Leech, the frameworks will prove useful. However, if you want to understand emic judgments on politeness, they will be less helpful.

*Claim:* The discursive approach to politeness focuses on the hearer/addressee and neglects the speaker/sender. *Response:* Both the speaker and the addressee are important since both are involved in making judgments and assessing effects with respect to (shared) norms. The aim is to understand how human beings use language for interpersonal effects. The impression of focusing only on the addressee may have been caused by the stress on 'judgments'. However, these judgments take part on the side of the speaker when choosing a linguistic strategy for a particular effect, as well as on the side of the addressee. It is important to stress that the results of these evaluations do not necessarily coincide, as we are not faced with simple encoding and decoding processes.

*Claim:* The discursive approach to politeness says that 'anything goes' and we have to abandon politeness research because 'politeness' is a member's judgment and the researcher can never establish with finality whether an utterance was meant or perceived as polite. *Response:* This is an important point to clarify that has to do with research methodology. First, however, we do not believe that 'anything goes'. Members' judgments are tied to the norms of a CofP, which is embedded in the larger social and cultural context. As a result, we should study these norms and be open for differences as well as similarities in the expectations. Following Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 588),

> [t]he property of emergence does not exclude the possibility that resources for identity work in any given interaction may derive from resources developed in earlier interactions (that is, they may draw on 'structure' – such as ideology, the linguistic system, or the relation between the two). (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588)

In other words, people do not start with a tabula rasa mind whenever they encounter a new situation or find themselves in a new encounter. In a process of analogy, certain expectations of rights and obligations are carried over from previous encounters or related activities, as outlined in section 5.1. It can be of interest to study both how the local CofP norms and the dependent evaluations of relational work emerge, as well as how they are embedded in larger cultural contexts. How can we study this?

Haugh (2007) and Xie et al. (2005) question the usefulness of the points raised by Locher and Watts (2005) since there is no methodological 'to do list' given. However, I believe that the methodology will depend on the exact research question so that no one single approach is necessarily better than the other. This point will be elaborated on in the next section.

## 6. Avenues to Explore

Reiterating the general aim of the study of relational work as the wish to better understand how people create relational effects by means of language, comprehend how this process is embedded in its cultural and situated context, and recognize how this is interrelated with socio-cognitive processes, we can name a number of avenues that are worth exploring from a theoretical and methodological point of view.

(1) How can we study the norms of communities of practice and evaluative concepts such as 'politeness'? There are numerous entry points that we can adopt from ethnomethodology, interactional sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and even more quantitatively oriented corpus analysis, etc. While members of a community indeed have the last word on 'politeness' because we are dealing with evaluative concepts, this does not mean that scholars cannot start looking for patterns in language use within CofPs and reflecting on how these patterns relate to the greater cultural context. Analysts who are either members of a practice themselves, or who have spent enough time to acquire an understanding of the norms in play will be able to grasp relational processes by looking at the interactional turn-by-turn development of language in use. From my point of view, the research aim is ultimately less to pinpoint a particular isolated utterance and spear it with the label 'polite' or 'impolite' than to work out the dynamics of relational processes in unfolding interaction and the negotiation of relationships. Depending on the research question, different methodologies will be more or less suitable. For example, interviews and discourse completion tasks, while not yielding naturally occurring data, will provide us with an entry point into lay understandings of frames, i.e. structures of expectations with respect to what interaction should look according to the informants. Diachronic and synchronic quantitative analyses on the semantic fields of evaluative concepts have their place in the study of relational work, just like turn-by-turn conversation analysis does in the search for evidence of the emergence of relational aspects. So far there is no fixed and exclusive methodology attached to the study of relational work and I would deem it a loss of

diversity if the term were to be associated with only one methodological approach.

(2) What about this process of 'judging'? This question is indeed in need of further theoretical and empirical exploration. We posited that evaluative terms can be positively and negatively charged (i.e. they are marked) and that there are also more neutral evaluative concepts of relational work (unmarked). However, in relation to what scales and concepts is this judging being made? Haugh (2007: 300) correctly asks: "In what ways is this positive marking, for example, related to face, identity, distancing/alignment, showing sincerity, or (un)intentional behaviour?" As outlined in this chapter, the judging will take place with respect to whether the expectations connected to the understandings of emergent roles tied to a frame are met or not. The reactions that trigger the positive and negative evaluations are hypothesized to be of an emotional, psychological kind (Locher and Langlotz 2008; Langlotz and Locher 2009, 2011, in press). However, it may well be more complex than this, so that, clearly, more research is needed here that will have to draw on cognitive and psychological findings as well.

(3) In addition to studying existing norms of particular CofPs, it is of interest to ask how both children and adults *acquire* knowledge of norms and notions of 'politeness'? This is a field that can be tackled in research interested in studying the dynamics of interaction, but especially also in first and second language acquisition research. Once more we are faced with the question of how norms can be studied and they come about (see (1) above). In addition, we can ask whether such knowledge of norms can be translated to a meta-level so that it can be taught in the classroom. For example, modern textbooks no longer only drill grammatical correctness, but take pragmatic knowledge into account to a certain extent (usually with respect to certain speech acts such as asking for help or advice), but is this sufficient for learners to function well in a different culture? Work by Spencer-Oatey (2005, 2007) seems to suggest that a certain awareness of the interpersonal power of language can be raised in cross-cultural situations, which might create an openness in interactants for differences in this crucial arena of interpersonal negotiation (cf. also Scollon and Scollon 1990). The list of research avenues is of course far from exhaustive.

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter started out by positioning the field of interest and identifying the interpersonal aspect of language use as the central focus of politeness research. A journey back to the beginning of this research in linguistics showed that these approaches have to be seen in light of the pragmatic turn and the wish to add 'pragmatic rules' to the 'syntactic rules' that were being discussed at the time. This search for general (maybe even universal) rules of politeness was contrasted with more recent approaches that highlight the situated, emergent creation of politeness in interaction. The 2000s have seen an opening of the research field towards a discussion of emic and etic concepts and a widening of the scope of the data and the research questions. Politeness is nowadays studied with respect to other evaluative concepts such as *impoliteness*, *rudeness*, or other lexemes that describe relational effects. The scope of the study of 'relational work', as proposed in this chapter, is indeed wider than the focus on politeness only: We wish to understand how people create relational effects by means of language, comprehend how this process is embedded in its cultural and situated context, and recognize how this is interrelated with socio-cognitive processes. The perspective on language in use that focuses on the relational aspect can be termed interpersonal pragmatics, i.e. the analyst wishes to "explore facets of interaction between social actors that rely upon (and in turn influence) the dynamics of relationships between people and how those relationships are reflected in the language choices that they make" (Locher and Graham 2010: 2). In contrast to Haugh (2007: 313), who calls for a clear delineation of politeness research from other fields such as "interpersonal and intercultural communication research" or the study of relational work / rapport management / face constitution, I propose that politeness research can benefit from opening up and taking insights from psychology, social cognition and identity research on board.

## Acknowledgments

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# PART II:

# (IM)POLITENESS IN THE MASS MEDIA

# New Perspectives on (Im)Politeness and Interpersonal Communication

Edited by

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**CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS**

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