

# PhD course in Pragmatics 2025

## A Seminar on Politeness

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### Politeness

In all cultures, people adhere to cultural norms in their communication and they follow rules of politeness to build appropriate relations showing that they are cooperative speakers

Language is not just a means to pass our ideas or needs to others, it is also a tool to show how participants negotiate interpersonal meaning and thus, to maintain social relationships . Language contains respectful forms of address like 'sir or madam', formulaic expressions like 'please, thank you, excuse me, sorry' that display polite behaviour of individuals. Nevertheless, individuals sometimes deviate from the social or cultural norms and cause social disharmony. Hence, a range of impoliteness behaviour arises during communication especially, when someone intends to offend the others (Watts, 2003 :1-2).

The concept of politeness and impoliteness has been one of the controversial issues that has been defined in different ways. Simply, politeness is a socio-pragmatic phenomenon that is governed by social rules and conventions that determine the success or failure of communication (Nikleva, 2018).

Lakoff (1979: 64) defines politeness in a slightly different way **as those forms of behaviour that have been "developed in societies to reduce friction in social interaction"**. She (1989: 102) maintains that such undesired frictions do exist in the daily interaction and need to be minimized by strategies or techniques developed by the society.

Leech (1980: 19) sees politeness as **"strategic conflict avoidance which can be measured in terms of the degree of effort put into the avoidance of a**

**conflict situation, and the establishment and the maintenance of comity".**

This definition later paved the way for Leech to set out his famous theory of 'Politeness Principles' in 1983.

- According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is seen as a system for softening those acts that are considered to be threatening to the hearer's face. Such acts are known as 'Face Threatening Acts'. Echoing Brown and Levinson, Yule (1996: 60) defines politeness as **"the means employed to show awareness of another person's face"**.

### **Face Theory (The Concept of `Face)**

**`Face` is first presented by Erving Goffman in (1963). The most relevant concept of politeness is the concept of "Face". Face is someone's public "self-image" that every person tries to protect.** It refers to a suitable mask one selects in an interaction. The addressee and the social situations control choosing or selecting the mask. For instance; in one situation, we may need to present the face of a good friend, whilst in another we may want to appear to be an intelligent student. Thus, we protect our own face and respect others' faces. Scollon and Scollon (1995: 35) define face as **" the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in communicative event."** Therefore, by designating ideas about the other participant, one can set up an interpersonal identity.

**The notion of `Face` mainly consists of two types of wants (face-wants): the negative and the positive faces.**

- **Negative face : refers to the need not to be unimpeded in an interaction. Or it is the need to be independent or free from imposition.**

- **positive face: involves a desire for connection with others .** Brown characterized **positive face** by desires to be liked, admired, ratified, and related to positively, noting that one would threaten positive face by ignoring someone.

Positive face refers to one's self-esteem.

These two aspects of face are the basic wants in any social interaction; during any social interaction, cooperation is needed amongst the participants to maintain each other's face. Participants can do this by using positive politeness and negative politeness, which pay attention to people's positive and negative face needs respectively. Every person whether speaker or hearer has positive and negative face.

### **Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) and Politeness strategies.**

Beside `face-wants`, Brown and Levinson pay attention to two other basic notions: **Face threatening Acts (FTAs) and Politeness strategies.**

**1. The FTAs act** is an act that damages the face of the **addressee or the speaker** by acting in opposition to the wants and desires of the other. Or the act that is a threat to person self-image. Face threatening acts can be verbal (using words/language), para verbal (conveyed in the characteristics of speech such as tone, inflection, etc.), or non-verbal (facial expression, etc.). At minimum, there must be at least one of the face threatening acts associated with an utterance. It is also possible to have multiple acts working within a single utterance. **FTAs are of two types :**

**a. FTAs of negative face** which means that the addresser doesn't prevent the addressee's freedom from imposition, i.e., the addresser imposes the addressee. (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65) Therefore, an order like **“Don't be late”** or advice like **“you should stand for year parents”** are danger to one's ‘independence’.

**- Damage to the hearer:** In this case, the negative face of the hearer (the person being spoken to) is threatened. as the act that affirms or the denies a future act of the hearer, and creates a pressure on the hearer to either perform or not perform

the act. It expresses that the speaker has a social power on the hearer. Such as orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats , or warning .

Examples: **Do your homework, Wash the dishes.**

- **Damage to the speaker** : In this case, the negative face of the speaker (The person talking) is threatened . as in the act that shows that the speaker is succumbing to the power of the hearer Expressing thanks, Accepting a thank or apology, excuses, acceptance of offers .

**b. FTAs of the positive face** which refer to the acts indicating that "the [addresser] does not care about the addressee's feelings, wants, etc." Therefore, criticism or showing straightforward discord and objections put the addressee's 'involvement face' in danger. It also causes damages to the speaker or hearer.

- **Damage to the hearer** : in this case, the positive face of the hearer (the person being spoken to ) is threatened . for instance, an act that expresses the speakers' negative assessment of the hearers' positive face or an element of his / her positive face . **e.g. expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations, insults (S indicates that he doesn't like/want one or more of H's wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values) .**

- **Damage to the speaker** : in this case, the positive face of the speaker (the person talking) is threatened. **for instance** , an act that shows the speaker in some sense wrong and unable to control himself . such as ,**apology ( In this act, speaker is damaging his own face by admitting that he regrets one of his previous acts), Acceptance of a compliment, Self-humiliation , Confessions etc.**

**Face – saving** is an act that prevents or stops embarrassment or predicament .

**Face – restoring** is an act that offers an excuse or excuses for embarrassment or predicament.

**Ex. Jane: Is that your photo Tom? (getting no answer ,she said: He couldn't hear me.( this is a face- restoring)**

## **2. Politeness strategies :**

Brown and Levinson use this argument in their politeness theory by saying that rational agents will choose the same politeness strategy as any other would under the same circumstances to try to mitigate face. Therefore rational agents seek to avoid face-threatening acts or will try to use certain strategies to minimize the threat. It should be noted that in certain situations, an over application of any particular strategy may actually achieve the opposite of the intended effect, as "certain speakers consistently evaluate polite behavior as unnecessary and offensive. Brown and Levinson outline four main types of politeness strategies: bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record (indirect) as well as simply not using the face-threatening act.

### **a. Bald on Record Strategy (Most Direct – Least Polite):**

This strategy is performed in the **most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise possible way** (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69). Apparently, the speaker performs the FTA more effectively, with no intention of offending the hearer's face, particularly in an emergency situation. **(e.g. shouting "Get out!" someone says when a house is on fire).** In addition, where there is a **very minor risk to the hearer's face** (e.g. "Come in" as a response when someone knocked the door). Often using such a strategy will shock or embarrass the addressee, and so this strategy is most often utilized in situations where the speaker has a close relationship with the listener, such as family or close friends. Brown and

Levinson outline various cases in which one might use the bald on-record strategy, including:

**Situations with no threat minimization: Ex. Watch out!**

**When efficiency is necessary: Ex. Hear me out.**

**Task-oriented : Ex. Pass me the hammer.**

### **b. Positive Politeness Strategy**

The speaker employs this strategy to **encourage high engagement and to demonstrate harmony or affection between the speaker and the addressee**. It is a kind of redressive behaviour directed at the hearer in order to keep his positive face and make him/her feel good about himself/herself. This strategy is used where the speaker wishes to provoke the listener's interest or to demonstrate cooperation and reach consensus (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 103).

**These strategies are used to make the hearer feel good about themselves, their interests or possessions, and are most usually used in situations where the audience knows each other fairly well.** In addition to hedging and attempts to avoid conflict, some strategies of positive politeness include statements of **friendship, solidarity, compliments**, and the following examples from Brown and Levinson:

You look sad, Can I do anything?

Use solidarity in-group identity markers

Heh, mate, can you lend me a dollar?

Be optimistic : Ex. I'll just come along, if you don't mind

**Include both speaker (S) and hearer (H) in activity :**

If we help each other, I guess, we'll both sink or swim in this course.

Offer or promise : If you wash the dishes, I'll vacuum the floor.

Exaggerate interest in H and his interests

That's a nice haircut you got; where did you get it

**Avoid Disagreement** : Ex. Yes, it's rather long; not short certainly.

Joke : Ex. Wow, that's a whopper!

### **c. Negative Politeness Strategy**

This strategy is completely contradictory to positive politeness. It is meant to reduce the imposition of FTAs on the addressee while emphasizing formality by respecting the addressee's negative face wants. **(For example, Excuse me, I don't want to annoy you, but could I please take that book?)** This strategy is used by the speaker in order to preserve social isolation (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 129).

#### **Examples from Brown and Levinson include:**

Be indirect : Ex. Would you know where Oxford Street is?

Use hedges or questions : Ex. Perhaps, he might have taken it, maybe?

**Be pessimistic** : Ex. You couldn't find your way to lending me a thousand dollars, could you?

**Minimize the imposition** : Ex. It's not too much out of your way, just a couple of blocks.

**Use obviating structures**: like nominalizations or passives.

I hope offense will not be taken.

**Apologetic** : Ex. I'm sorry; it's a lot to ask, but can you lend me a thousand dollars?

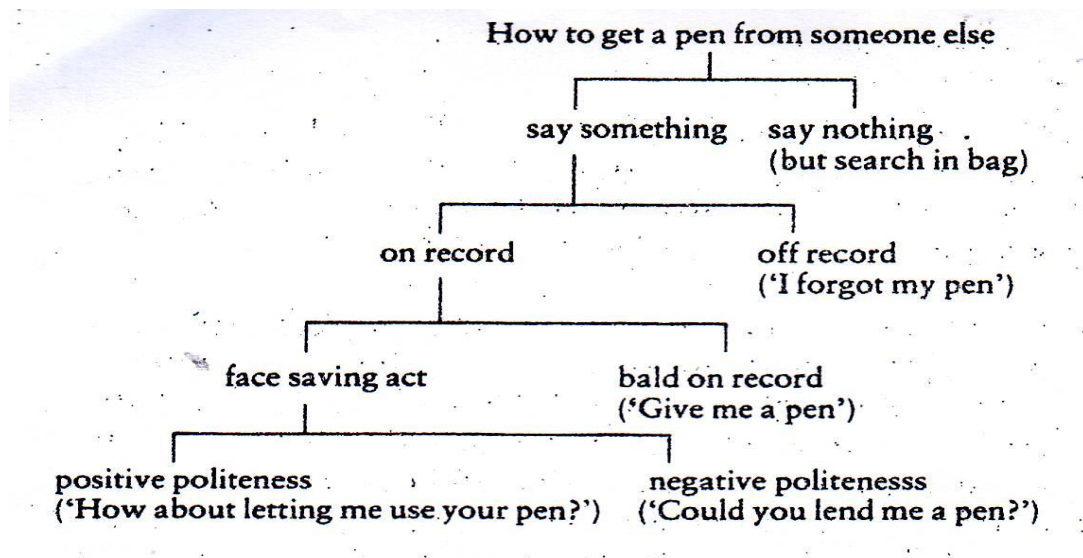
**Use plural pronouns** : Ex. We regret to inform you.

### **d. Off- Record Strategy ( Least Direct – Most Polite)**

**When the speaker intends to achieve a communicative action by implicature**, this strategy is used, that is, the speaker is attempting to avoid being direct in certain cases, and the hearer is required to perceive the speaker's utterance. To avoid FTA, the speaker uses indirectness such as "I'm hungry" instead of saying "Give me some food" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 69).

#### d. Withhold the FTA

When the risk of threatening the hearer's face is very high, interlocutors employ this strategy and thus the speaker remains silent without using any speech act (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 70). **For example , the student forgot his pen at home and he started to look for it , in order to make his colleague to give him another pen.**





## **Leech's Politeness Model (Politeness principles)**

Leech (1983: 131) proposes a set of six paired maxims of politeness depending on his own assumption that politeness concerns a relationship between two participants whom he calls *Self* (s) and *Other* (h). He notifies that the latter may involve a third party who is either a bystander or belongs to s's or h's sphere. He associates each maxim with a certain type/s of speech acts depending on Searle's taxonomy (1979). It is appropriate now to introduce Leech's maxims of politeness (1983: 132):

### **1. Tact Maxim** (in impositives and commissives)

(a) Minimize cost to *other* [(b) Maximize benefit to *other*]

Ex: *-Could I interrupt you for a second ?*

*-If I could just clarify this then.*

### **2. Generosity Maxim** (in impositives and commissives)

(a) Minimize benefit to *self* [(b) Maximize cost to *self*]

Ex: *You relax and let me do the dishes.*

### **3. Approbation Maxim** (in expressives and assertives)

(a) Minimize dispraise of *other* [(b) Maximize praise of *other*]

Ex: *john, I know you are a genius, would you tell me how to solve this math problem here?*

### **4. Modesty Maxim** (in expressives and assertives)

(a) Minimize praise of *self* [(b) Maximize dispraise of *self*]

Ex: *Oh, I'm so stupid – I didn't make a note of our lecture ! Did you?*

### **5. Agreement Maxim** (in assertives)

(a) Minimize disagreement between *self* and *other*

[(b) Maximize agreement between *self* and *other*]

Ex: *A-I don't want my daughter to do this, I want her to do that.*

*B-Yes, but mam, I thought we resolved this already on your last visit.*

#### **6. Sympathy Maxim** (in assertives)

(a) Minimize antipathy between *self* and *other*

[(b) Maximize sympathy between *self* and *other*]

Ex: *I am sorry to hear your father's sickness.*

### **Politeness and Impoliteness**

Closely tied to politeness is the concept of impoliteness by which fresh blood has been brought into academia in pragmatics. Similar to politeness, the phenomenon of impoliteness is not an easy term to define. A simple definition of impoliteness would be: "a face threatening act in a specific context" (Bousfield & Locher, 2008). The early 2000s witnessed an emergence in the understanding of conflictive interaction. One of the most essential papers in the field of impoliteness is Culpeper's (1996) article which was inspired by Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness. Culpeper (1996) built an impoliteness framework which is parallel but opposite to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. This model was then, expanded in 2003 and 2005 by Culpeper himself.

In their theory of politeness, Brown and Levinson were based on notions of 'face' to achieve harmonious interactions. But they did not, specifically, come across impoliteness, just focused on politeness. They did not provide a thorough analysis of what precisely impoliteness is, because they assume impoliteness as an

absence of politeness, or the deviation from social norms. However, the frequency of the use of politeness paved the way for the field of impoliteness (Sharifian & Tayebi, 2017).

### **Impoliteness**

According to Culpeper (2011), impoliteness is a multidisciplinary field of study in that it can be studied within different fields such as psychology, sociology, history, media, business and literary studies. He claims that impoliteness arises in social interaction. Brown and Levinson's theory states that any behaviour that attempts to protect the face of the addressee is polite; by contrast, any behaviour that attacks the face of the addressee is impolite, i.e. an impolite act is the absence of politeness. **Impoliteness is considered as an intentionally planned act to attack others' face.**

Leech says that **"the best way to start theorizing about impoliteness is to build on a theory of politeness, which is clearly related phenomenon and in fact, the opposite of politeness"**. This is exactly what Culpeper did in his first seminal article, especially when he defined impoliteness as **"communicative strategies designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony"** (Culpeper et al. 2003). From this point, it is relatively easy to describe harsh speaking.

Culpeper briefly defines impoliteness as **the use of strategies that are designed to have the opposite effect – that of social disruption**. These strategies are oriented towards attacking face, an emotionally sensitive concept of the self (Culpeper, 1996). This is the first definition which embodies a mirror of Brown and Levinson's definition of politeness. Culpeper suggests that impoliteness is to attack the face wants of the addressee (whether positive or negative), rather than

promoting social harmony.

Impoliteness comes about when: **(1)** the speaker communicates face attack intentionally, or **(2)** the hearer perceives and/or constructs behavior as intentionally face- attacking, or a combination of (1) and (2).

In his work, Culpeper (2010) gives a new definition of impoliteness by including factors such as negative behaviour, context, participants' possible intentions and perceptions. Impoliteness is a negative attitude towards specific behaviours occurring in specific contexts.

Additionally, Holmes et al. (2008) define impoliteness as "linguistic behaviour assessed by the hearer as threatening her or his face or social identity, and infringing the norms of appropriate behaviour that prevail in particular contexts and among particular interlocutors, **whether intentionally or not**".

Tracy's (1998) definition of impoliteness is: "communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive".

Finally, Culpeper (2018) redefined impoliteness to be: "impoliteness typically refers to language that is used to cause offence or is perceived to cause offence".

### **Types of Impoliteness**

Culpeper describes three categories of impoliteness in his book: Using Language to Cause Offence (2011). These categories are:

#### **1. Affective impoliteness**

This is used by the S(peaker) to display the negative emotional state, typically anger, in contexts with the implication that the target is responsible for this negative emotional feeling.

The following example illustrate how affective impoliteness works:

**S: You little silly. What happened to my car? (expresses anger and**

**negative emotional state which is blaming).**

**H: I'm sorry. (for what has happened to S's car).**

## **2. Coercive impoliteness**

In this type, the speaker attempts to increase and show some kind of power and social class over the hearer by means of socially unacceptable speech patterns.

The example below shows the position of the S is higher than the position of the H:

**S: Can you clean this room?**

**H: Yes, sir, but let me finish my work.**

**S: I don't care whether you finish your work or not.**

## **3. Entertaining impoliteness**

In this type of impoliteness, S produces a speech which is not to offend the target, but rather to poke jokes or make entertainment.

The following example shows how entertaining impoliteness is used by the S to make entertainment:

**S: Wow! Your room is so amazing!**

**H: Thank you. I made it myself.**

**S: Really? I want one for my dog.**

## **Factors Affecting Impoliteness**

Loosing and maintaining face depends on how people behave in their communication. Different variables influence the participants' behaviour by which we come to assume a specific behavior as either polite or impolite. These variables differ from one situation to another.

## **1. Social Norm**

Social norm refers to social habits" and violating these norms leads to the attribution of impoliteness.

Nowadays, in some societies if you visit someone without telling or calling him, it will be impolite behavior.

## **2. Power**

Power has a close relationship with politeness and impoliteness in the sense that the exercise of power involves a latent conflict. (i.e., the more you have power, the more you have chance to be impolite). Supporting this view, Mills (2003) points out that one way to distinguish between men and women's speech is the use of power.

## **3. Class**

Individuals belong to a certain social category, for example low class speakers use more vernacular forms of language. Whereas high class people such as employers, religious figures, rich and educators are less likely to be offensive to others.

## **4. Age**

Regarding age, there are basically four levels: child, teenager, adult and elder. For example, very young and very old people provoke less anger than teenagers and adults. Therefore, middle-class age (teenagers and adults) are more likely to employ impolite expressions.

## **5. Gender**

It is claimed that one of the features that distinguishes men and women's speech is the use of swearing in that men use more swear expressions than women do. Women innately display prestigious form in communication and often choose polite performance. Women are likely to be hesitant and they perform hedging or deference within their language avoiding swearing and other taboo forms.

### **Culpeper's Model of Impoliteness**

Culpeper (1996: 355-357) says that impoliteness is the "parasite of politeness". He demonstrates that it is important to be aware of the fact that some areas of politeness are not well represented in Brown and Levinson's politeness model and that those deficiencies could be carried out into an impoliteness framework. Brown and Levinson's model is mainly geared to handling matters relating to linguistic form.

**Culpeper (1996) takes Brown and Levinson's super-strategies and inverts them to describe impoliteness.** These impoliteness super-strategies and example output strategies are as follows (incorporating one revision proposed in Culpeper 2005):

#### **1. Bald on Record Impoliteness**

The FTA is performed to damage the hearer's face in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way;

**e.g. "Open the door".** There is an intention on the part of the S to attack the face of the H.

**e.g. "shut up you dumb"** In this utterance, the imperative command stated directly is considered as bald on record impoliteness.

#### **2. Positive Impoliteness**

This strategy is designed to damage the addressee's positive face wants (his/her desire to be liked, accepted or appreciated by others). Such as ignoring the others :

**"I don't care what you do".**

In this utterance, the speaker do not care about what someone do. Unconcerned about someone here is considered as positive impoliteness

**"No keep away! Go home, we don't want you"**

In this utterance, the speaker excludes someone from an activity.

### **3. Negative Impoliteness**

This strategy is utilized to damage the hearer's negative face wants (his/her desire to be independent and free from imposition of others). such as Frightening , scorning or ridicule, Belittling the others, Assessing Appearance, as in

**"Stop wearing that stupid t-shirt"**

**"These clothes are more suitable for middle aged women. A child should be wearing trend clothes, these are rotten!"**

### **4. Sarcasm or Mock Politeness**

The FTA is performed with the use of politeness strategies that are obviously insincere, i.e. on the surface, the utterances sound polite but the intended meaning is the opposite. For example, (How a smart student you are. Said by a teacher in a sarcastic way to a student). Any strategy used insincerely is acceptable to perform sarcasm, not only a specific strategy. The role of sarcasm is to achieve social disharmony and it is of course, the opposite of mock impoliteness (banter) which is used for social harmony. Culpeper's clarification of sarcasm is close to Leech's (1983) conception of irony when Leech (1983: 82) points out that Irony Principle (IP) occurs as follows: "If you want to cause offence, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the (PP), but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by ways of implicature".

**e.g. When a thief snatched something from someone and the thief said "have a good day", it will be considered as a sarcasm because what actually happened to the victim is a bad day.**



## 5. Withhold Politeness

The absence of politeness works where it is expected to be (to keep silent or fail to act politely where it is expected) . For example, failing to thank somebody for a favour or a present may be taken as deliberate impoliteness.

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