1 Introducing linguistic politeness

CHARACTERISING POLITE BEHAVIOUR

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

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

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

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

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

(1)

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

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

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

(2)

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

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

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

We can call the varied interpretations of politeness and impoliteness in ongoing verbal interaction 'folk interpretations' or 'lay interpretations'. They are clearly not of the same order as the terms 'politeness' and 'impoliteness' when these are used as technical concepts in sociolinguistic theorising about social interaction. Watts *et al.* (1992a) maintain that researchers into linguistic politeness frequently confuse 'folk', or 'lay', interpretations with the technical interpretation, and throughout this book I shall make a concerted effort to keep the two perspectives apart. I shall call 'folk' interpretations of (im)politeness 'first-order (im)politeness' (or, following Eelen 2001, (im)politeness$_1$) and (im)politeness as a concept in a sociolinguistic theory of (im)politeness 'second-order (im)politeness' (or (im)politeness$_2$).

Eelen refers to the kinds of metapragmatic evaluation of the nature and significance of politeness/impoliteness as *metapragmatic politeness*$_1$, and the comments made either by outsiders to the interaction or even by the participants themselves as *classificatory politeness*$_1$. He also suggests a third type of politeness$_1$, which he calls *expressive politeness*$_1$, in which participants aim at explicitly producing polite language. Expressive politeness$_1$ is in evidence when participants make use of formulaic language, presumably to adopt a respectful, or polite stance to the addressee. In extract (1) R's utterance *beg your pardon* could be called expressive politeness. Had he said nothing, he would have indicated either that in this group of people burping is a normal form of behaviour and does not need to be atoned for, or that he is hoping that no other participants will have noticed the 'incident'. Similarly, it is also possible to classify S's *can I come back on Mandy's point* in extract (2) as a formulaic utterance expressing concern for the moderator, although it's perhaps not quite so formulaic as R's utterance in (1). There is a difference in the two situations, however. In extract (1) R does not really have much choice but to use an instance of expressive politeness$_1$ if he does not want to be thought of as a boorish, ill-bred person. In extract (2), however, S *does* have a choice, and no one would think him impolite if he had used an utterance like *I'd like to come back on Mandy's point*. S's choice of language here appears to be strategic, whereas social constraints do not leave R any choice in extract (1). Both types of expressive politeness$_1$ (socially constrained utterances and strategically chosen utterances) have been the subject of theorising about politeness as a pragmatic, sociolinguistic concept. Before we go on to make a clearer distinction between (im)politeness$_1$ and (im)politeness$_2$, however, we first need to consider briefly the nature of the distinction between polite and impolite

behaviour, remembering while we do so that we are still referring to politeness$_1$.

POLITE AND IMPOLITE BEHAVIOUR

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

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

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

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

(3)

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

The extract is taken from an interview on the BBC television programme *Panorama* during the famous miners' strike in the early 1980s. Even allowing for the 'freedom' that programme moderators seem to have preempted for themselves these days, E's intervention at the first double-shafted arrow in score 5 can be classified as an example of blatant interruption (cf. Watts 1991). This is evidenced by his insertion of the formulaic utterance of expressive politeness$_1$ *sorry*. S's intervention at the second double-shafted arrow in score 6 contains a highly emotive comment on E's behaviour, which constitutes clear evidence of the way he has interpreted it, even though he does not use either the lexeme 'impolite' or the lexeme 'rude'.

In the following extract from a radio phone-in programme on the subject of snooker and billiards, in which the moderator is accompanied by an expert in the studio, one of the callers feels somewhat left out at one stage in her call and protests (good-naturedly). The behaviour of the moderator and the expert is openly criticised, and the moderator is the first to admit the mistake. As in the previous extract, the word *impolite* is not used explicitly as an evaluative comment on their behaviour (classificatory politeness$_1$) by any of the participants, although non-participants commenting on this extract might easily classify it as such:

(4)

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

M's utterance at the first double-shafted arrow in score 11 displays expressive politeness$_1$ in the formulaic indirect request *can I come back in now*, but it merely prefaces her critical remark at the second double-shafted arrow in score 12 in which she upbraids J and C for having left her out of the interaction. She has after all called to participate in the programme and is left hanging on the phone listening to J and C when *she* has the right to participate and *they* have the obligation to allow her to participate. There is also a clear change of footing immediately after this utterance. She inserts a pause and signals a shift to a further topic by using the pause filler *er*. After the exchange is completed, there is a significant pause of roughly one second after which the moderator C, at the third double-shafted arrow in score 15, assesses the significance of M's criticism – *felt she put me in my place there* – acknowledges his mistake – *fair enough* – and her right to intervene – *I think that's quite right*.

THE DISCURSIVE DISPUTE OVER POLITENESS$_1$

(Im)politeness$_1$, therefore, reveals a great deal of vacillation on how behaviour is evaluated as 'polite' at the positive end of the scale when compared with the negative end. It would also seem that whether or not a participant's behaviour is evaluated as polite or impolite is not merely a matter of the linguistic expressions that s/he uses, but rather depends on the interpretation of that behaviour in the overall social interaction. The interpretations are thus first-order evaluations which are often not expressed in terms of the cluster of adjectives associated with (im)politeness. If they are, it is far more likely to be impolite behaviour which is commented on. If the researcher wishes to locate polite behaviour, s/he must begin by examining very closely what happens in the flow of social interaction in order to identify the kinds of behaviour that seem to warrant the attribution of the term 'polite'.

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

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

Does this then mean that a second-order theory of politeness, a theory of politeness$_2$, should only concern itself with lay notions of politeness? The answer to this question is equivocal: yes and no. Yes, in the sense that a scientific theory of a lay term must take that lay term in lay usage as its central focus, but no, in the sense that a theory of politeness should not attempt to 'create' a superordinate, universal term that can then be applied universally to any socio-cultural group at any point in time. If we were to do that – and I shall argue that this is exactly what has hitherto been done (by myself as well as others) – we would bring back and apply to the study of social behaviour a set of concepts revolving around a notion of politeness$_2$ that transcend the ongoing struggle over the term '(im)politeness'. We would then be studying something else in social behaviour which, although we might call it '(im)politeness', is not what lay members of the social group would label in the same way. We would fail to approach an understanding of how the term is used and the nature of the struggle over its use. To put it briefly, we would create a concept of '(im)politeness' which does not correspond to native speakers' everyday conceptualisations of the term.

POLITENESS$_1$ AND POLITENESS$_2$

A theory of politeness$_2$ should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness$_1$, i.e. over the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members and not with ways in which social scientists lift the term '(im)politeness' out of the realm of everyday discourse and elevate it to the status of a theoretical concept in what is frequently called Politeness Theory.

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

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

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

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

Clearly, Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) will figure very prominently in this book. Like all of the other theories of politeness$_2$ that have hitherto been proposed, however, hacking a path out of the jungle of ideas on social interaction has only served to make those ideas grow more quickly and become more rampant. Brown and Levinson's work will undoubtedly continue to exert as much influence on research into the subject in the coming years as it has in the past. But a number of crucial criticisms of Brown and Levinson's approach have emerged since the beginning of the 1990s, opening up broader perspectives from which to approach the phenomenon of linguistic politeness. In addition, the study of verbal forms of social interaction has now progressed so far that alternative methods of studying the phenomenon