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978-0-521-79406-0 - Politeness
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Politeness

During the last fifteen years, existing models of linguistic politeness have generated a huge amount of empirical research. Using a wide range of data from real-life speech situations, this new introduction to politeness breaks away from the limitations of current models and argues that the proper object of study in politeness theory must be commonsense notions of what politeness and impoliteness are. From this, Watts argues, a more appropriate model, one based on Bourdieu's concept of social practice, is developed. The book aims to show that the terms 'polite' and 'impolite' can only be properly examined as they are contested discursively. In doing so, 'polite' and 'impolite' utterances inevitably involve their users in a struggle for power.

A radically new account of linguistic politeness, the book will appeal to students and researchers in a wide range of disciplines, in linguistics and the social sciences.

RICHARD J. WATTS is Full Professor of English Linguistics, University of Berne, Switzerland. His previous publications include *Standard English: the Widening Debate* (edited with Tony Bex) (1999), *Politeness in Language* (edited with Sachiko Ide and Konrad Ehlich) (1992), *Alternative Histories of English* (edited with Peter Trudgill) (2002) and *Power in Family Discourse* (1991).

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Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521794060

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First published 2003
 Fourth printing 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Watts, Richard J.

Politeness / Richard J. Watts.

p. cm. – (Key topics in sociolinguistics)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 79085 9 (hardback) ISBN 0 521 79406 4 (paperback)

I. Sociolinguistics. 2. Etiquette. 3. Forms of address. I. Title. II. Series.

P40.5.E75W38 2003

306.44 – dc21 2003043599

ISBN 978-0-521-79085-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-79406-0 Paperback

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To my granddaughter, Jenny, who appears in chapter 7

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Preface

Writing an introduction to politeness is like being in mortal combat with a many-headed hydra. You've barely severed one head when a few more grow in its place. The first head I needed to sever was whether politeness should be taken to include all forms of polite behaviour or to focus on polite language usage. For a linguist it was not difficult to chop off that particular head. It was obvious that an introduction to politeness should focus on forms of social behaviour involving language. But the problem was that, once I had severed that head, a whole set of other heads promptly emerged. Should an introduction to politeness, understood now as linguistic politeness, focus on the canonical models of politeness in language currently on the market? What is polite language in any case? Should an introduction to politeness reveal to the reader the wide scope of empirical research on politeness in fields as far apart as legal language, second language acquisition, business studies, gender issues, developmental psychology, etc.? At present I already have a bibliography that contains roughly 1,200 titles, and it is growing steadily week by week. Should an introduction to politeness focus more solidly on the theoretical issues informing this empirical research? Or would it not have been easier to write about linguistic structures that have traditionally been considered in the literature to be 'polite', e.g. honorifics, terms of address, polite formulaic utterances, indirect speech acts, etc.? And what about the vexing issue of why so little has been written about impoliteness?

From this the reader may conclude that it has taken a little longer to write this book than I had originally planned. Faced with the hydra of politeness that I could not possibly defeat, I retired from the battle and laid aside my sword. I then started to ask myself the fundamental questions that had been spilling around in my own head for years. How could I write an introduction to politeness for readers entering the field for the first time without getting them hopelessly bogged down in a morass of problematic theoretical issues in current research? At

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the same time, however, how could I set out in as readable a way as possible what I consider to be a new approach to the field and, at the same time, carry the reader along with me?

One thing was immediately clear to me: a new approach to linguistic politeness must involve a break with the dominant research paradigm in the field, i.e. Brown and Levinson's long 1978 article published in book form in 1987 with the title *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. But it would also necessitate the introduction of technical terms with which the reader may not be familiar. To make the book as accessible as possible to the uninitiated reader, I have therefore provided a glossary of technical terms at the end of the book, and I have endeavoured to keep my explanations as straightforward as possible.

This preface already seems littered with negative metaphors like a battle with the hydra of politeness and readers getting bogged down in a morass of theoretical issues. (The previous sentence continues the trend by introducing the metaphor of metaphors littering the text!) So perhaps the reader will grant me one last negative metaphor. At one stage in writing this book I distinctly felt that I was alone and adrift in an ocean of Brown-Levinsonian empirical work on politeness and that I was desperately trying to find dry land and a friendly shore. I found the land I was looking for in 2001 when I read Gino Eelen's book *A Critique of Politeness Theories* and was relieved to see that my intellectual compass had not led me astray. A direct consequence of my reading it was the collaboration between Gino, myself and Jim O'Driscoll in organising a colloquium on what we call, taking Gino's lead, the *discursive* approach to linguistic politeness at the 'Sociolinguistics Symposium 14' held at the University of Ghent in April 2002. Working towards that colloquium set me back on track to finish off the writing of this book. Without the support and intellectual stimulation provided (perhaps not always consciously) by Gino and Jim, I might still be writing it now. At this point I should also like to extend my thanks to the other participants at the colloquium, Maria Sifianou, Juliane House, Derek Bousfield, Saeko Fukushima, Miriam Locher, Gudrun Held and, although he is not really 'into' politeness research, John Haviland, for making it such a memorable occasion and for giving me renewed confidence in presenting my ideas on linguistic politeness to readers new to the field.

I suppose the person responsible for getting me to fight the hydra in the first place, for allowing me to see whether I could cross the bog without sinking in and for casting me out on the Brown-Levinsonian sea (and also for causing me to leave behind quite remarkable quantities of litter) was Andrew Winnard at Cambridge University Press.

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I would like to extend my warm thanks to him and the team at Cambridge for a magnificent job. Without a good publisher behind me, I would never have begun the work. I have never regretted having taken on the challenge, but without Andrew's remarkable restraint in not constantly badgering me to keep to the time limits that I set myself, it would not have been brought to fruition (yet another metaphor, but positive this time).

Teachers at universities should never forget the debt that they owe to their students. It was Noam Chomsky who once said that if you're still teaching at age 50 what you were teaching at age 25, you should think of giving up. But university teachers would not bridge that time gap creatively if they did not have innovative, keen young intellects urging them on to stay young in their own minds and to keep abreast of the latest movements in their field. I have tried out the ideas in this book on my own students in the English Department of the University of Berne and on students in the English Department of the University of Lausanne while I was teaching there during the academic year 2000–1. They were critical, sometimes harshly so, and many of the chapters have had to be changed dramatically on the basis of our discussions. I would like to take the opportunity of thanking them all for their constructive criticism and their unfailing support. It would be nice to think that I may have sown the seeds from which a future generation of politeness researchers will emerge.

I would also like to extend warm thanks to my assistant at the University of Berne, Adrian Pablé, for taking on the job of giving the first draft a good close reading. In particular my thanks go to Simon Hicks at the Department of English, who has been a good colleague of mine for several years now, for putting me through an amazingly critical reading of the second draft, including a couple of raps over the knuckles concerning comma placement! A further, very special vote of thanks goes to my very own graduate student guinea-pig, Kellie Gonçalves from the USA, for proving that the book is readable by graduates new to the field.

When university teachers write books, they tend to strain the patience of colleagues and co-workers. I should therefore like to thank all my colleagues in the English Department at the University of Berne for putting up with my frequent disappearances from the department during the process of writing. At least the book is evidence that the disappearances were not in vain. However, I would like to thank my research assistants, Peter Schärer, Dominique Kläy and, in particular, Miriam Locher, for fruitful discussions and heated arguments about linguistic politeness and for putting up with a frequently moody professor.

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The warmest thanks are reserved for those who have to bear the major brunt of the ups and downs during the course of writing a book – one's family. Apart from me, my family consists of my wife Anne-Marie, my son Chris, my daughter-in-law Heike and my granddaughter Jenny, to whom this book is dedicated with love. When my wife learnt that I had been asked to write an introductory book on politeness, she could not resist making the following comment: 'It's ironic that just about the most impolite person I know has been asked to write about politeness.' She has since shown amazing tenacity in putting up with me throughout the writing process. My thanks also go to my son, my daughter-in-law and my granddaughter for coming round and lifting up my spirits whenever they were getting low.