

## Politeness in East Asia

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We use politeness every day when interacting with other people. Yet politeness is an impressively complex linguistic process, and studying it can tell us a lot about the social and cultural values of social groups or even a whole society, helping us to understand how humans 'encode' states of mind in their words. The traditional, stereotypical view is that people in East Asian cultures are indirect, deferential and extremely polite – sometimes more polite than seems necessary. This revealing book takes a fresh look at the phenomenon, showing that the situation is far more complex than these stereotypes would suggest. Taking examples from Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese and Singaporean Chinese, it shows how politeness differs across countries, but also across social groups and subgroups. The first comprehensive study of the subject, this book is essential reading for those interested in intercultural communication, linguistics and East Asian languages.

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## Foreword

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Matters related to human interaction in general, and ‘politeness’ in particular, have intrigued me for a long time; as a temporary inter-continental commuter – I currently live between Europe and Asia – I have had the privilege of experiencing interpersonal relations and of observing manifestations of what could be defined ‘polite’ and ‘impolite’ behaviour in some of the countries represented in this volume, for example China, Japan and Singapore. Reading the pages of this book was more than an academic exercise, however stimulating that would be in its own right: I found myself reflecting on the authors’ arguments and perspectives in the light of my own experiences of East and South East Asia and of exchange with colleagues from those regions.

The contents of this volume reminded me of the lines made famous by the film *Forest Gump*: “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.” Variety is almost guaranteed when one combines a topic as complex and elusive as ‘politeness’ – for which scholars have probably given up hope of providing a robust, shared definition – with a spectrum of countries each maintaining their distinct individual character in spite of sharing major philosophical and religious traditions.

It is this kind of variety which does not aim to provide the comprehensiveness offered by an encyclopaedia, but instead seeks to invite old hands and newcomers alike to an assortment of newly commissioned essays. There is something for everyone: sociolinguists, cultural and linguistic anthropologists, discourse analysts, applied linguists, cultural studies and communication scholars and more.

References recurring in a few chapters remind us of the pervasiveness and power of stereotype and affect in interpersonal and intergroup judgement, including perceptions of behaviour as more or less ‘polite’. It is true that our professional and personal relationships with individuals from other regions of the world sometimes colour the perception we hold of the whole group they belong to.

The intuitive notion of ‘surface politeness’, or one of its variants (e.g. courtesy, civility, good manners, propriety, decorum, etc.), which we form on the



basis of a first encounter, appears to be entangled with the baggage of stereotypical knowledge that we often maintain about our momentary interlocutor(s). National stereotypes come to mind here as easy repositories of fixed attributes on which we instinctively draw in an intercultural situation. At times, even physical appearance, dress code and mannerisms all seem to confirm the felicity of stereotypical knowledge.

Thus the ‘politeness of the Asians’ is written and spoken about, including in some academic texts and circles, as something that hundred of millions of individuals are naturally endowed with; sometimes it is also contrasted to the brashness of the Europeans or the north Americans. Even brief contact with ‘Asians’ – another shorthand item with stereotypical overtones – will reveal behaviours representative of all degrees of the im/politeness spectrum. More importantly for those of us involved in researching the nature and functions of im/politeness, such encounters will continuously challenge our preconceptions on the personal motives and social purposes of ‘polite behaviour’.

One important contribution of a volume such as this to current scholarly debates and to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of interpersonal relations must be the invitation shared by all contributors to look again at *what we think we already know* about familiar topics. It may be the multiple indexicality of honorifics in Japanese or Korean, or the interplay of affect and politeness, or non-verbal politeness, or the ideological import of politeness perceptions.

It seems to me that the contribution of this volume goes beyond a welcome addition to scholarship. If encounters and collaboration with colleagues from China, Singapore, Japan, Korea, etc. can often become the opportunity for re-visiting familiar practices and beliefs, then the study of ‘politeness’ affords a perspective on human interaction that touches upon delicate and fascinating issues of social order dynamics.

In other words, when we write and read about politeness we are in fact dwelling on some of the more subtle mechanisms and strategies that are consciously or unconsciously activated when we come face to face with other humans.

Returning to the theme of the ‘box of chocolates’, I would like to consider this volume as a taster of things to come, the first sample of a new research wave on politeness in East and South East Asian languages inspired by the remarkably productive 2008 International Politeness Symposium (Budapest, Hungary). This event was organised under the significant banner ‘East meets West’, a partnership whose renewal and strengthening we can all await with anticipation.

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# Abbreviations

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The following abbreviations are used in grammatical glosses.

ACC	accusative
AH	addressee honorific suffix
APPREC	appreciative
ASP	aspect marker
ASSRT	assertive
ATTR	attributive
BEN	benefactive auxiliary
CL	classifier
COMP	complementiser
CONT	contrastive marker
COP	copula verb
DEC	declarative
FML	familiar
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
HON	honorific
HUM	humble
IMP	imperative
INT	interrogative
INTJ	interjection
INTN	intentional
INTR	intransitive
M	mood marker
NEG	negation
NOM	nominative
NOMI	nominaliser
OH	object honorifics
PAST	past tense
PL	plural

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POL	polite
POS	possessive marker
PRS	present
PROG	progressive aspect
PT	discourse particle
Q	question marker
QUOT	quotation marker
REF	reference
SH	subject honorifics
TOP	topic marker