# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Why this book?

This book provides an overview of politeness. Politeness is a key means by which humans work out and maintain interpersonal **relationships**. Many of us have been educated how to behave politely since childhood; we only have to think about parents prescribing to their children when and how to apologise, to say 'please' and 'thank you' (at least in English), or to call (*jiao*) people by familial titles when greeting them (at least in Chinese). However, politeness is not limited to conventional acts of linguistic etiquette like formal apologies, so-called 'polite' language and address terms, although it includes all of these acts. Rather, it covers something much broader, encompassing all types of inter-personal behaviour through which we take into account the feelings of others as to how they think they should be treated in working out and maintaining our sense of personhood as well as our interpersonal relationships with others.

However, while this book relies on this broad definition of politeness, in accordance with its title *Understanding Politeness* we propose that there are in fact often multiple different **understandings** of politeness at play in discourse. Various different disciplinary and **theoretical** perspectives are necessitated, in turn, in order to tease out these multiple understandings of politeness. In this book we suggest that these various understandings offer different insights, which may at times be complementary, and so instead of singling out any one of these understandings, we aim to introduce a variety of them, with the aim of helping readers to make their way into this fascinating area. Our aim, then, is to discuss these different understandings of politeness in a systematic and organised way, with our aim being to point out interconnections between various views on and perceptions of politeness.

There is an important rationale behind authoring an overview of this field, as our aim is not just to summarise but also to provide an analytical framework by means of which one can successfully situate the analysis of politeness across time and space. Currently, politeness research is struggling with a fundamental difficulty that tends to face all work in the social sciences and humanities: namely, how to systematically analyse and describe the phenomena in

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question without falling into the trap of overgeneralising. Politeness research
has gone through several stages. Until the beginning of the twenty-first century,
most politeness researchers attempted to systematise the analysis of polite-
ness through different theoretical frameworks. However, critiques of these
theories began very soon after they were first proposed, and since the 2000s
these critiques have been gaining steam to the point that to talk about a sci-
entific or theoretical understanding of politeness without consideration of the
understandings of the **participants** themselves, at least in some respect, seems
simply out of step with the times. Yet because of this, politeness research has
been left in somewhat of a theoretical limbo. Indeed, although early theories
of politeness are often claimed to be highly problematic, we have nevertheless
(sometimes unwittingly) inherited many of the underlying assumptions of those
first attempts at theorising politeness. And despite the numerous critiques no
similar systematic account of politeness has yet been created to take their place.
It is therefore perhaps not surprising that politeness researchers often continue
to employ these assumptions, either as is, or in some modified form. Indeed,
in the popular online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* one of the **first-wave** theories,
namely, Brown and Levinson's (1987; see Chapter 2) continues to be equated
with 'politeness theory' as if there were no other valid perspectives in existence
(see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politeness_theory). From the perspective of
many, this lack of a systematic theoretical approach to politeness is under-
standable and even acceptable. As Mills (2011a) argues, it is not a pre-evident
objective that we need to systematically describe linguistic politeness, which is
by its very nature diverse and **contested**, while Watts (2005) questions whether
a theory of politeness is even possible. And yet an account of politeness, espe-
cially a book on politeness, cannot function without being able to determine
what politeness involves, how it arises and how understandings of it can vary
between individuals and across various social groups.

 We argue that if there is such a thing as politeness it goes beyond the bound-
aries of language, and so an overview of how we can analyse politeness – like
the one provided by this book – necessitates a multidisciplinary approach that
goes beyond the boundaries of traditional linguistic pragmatics and sociolin-
guistics, drawing also from insights into politeness that can be gained from
work in semantics, corpus linguistics, historical linguistics and pragmatics,
phonetics and phonology, conversation analysis and ethnomethodology, soci-
ology, (intercultural) communication, cognitive science and psychology and so
on and so forth. This means we need to observe politeness as a **social practice**,
and to bring together first-order (language **user**) and second-order (language
**observer**) understandings of it. We also need to capture the pervasiveness of
politeness, which is more often than not noted for its absence rather than for
its presence. This is very much in accordance with recent arguments in the
field that call for research that explores politeness from multiple perspectives

through interdisciplinary analyses by reflexively aware researchers (Haugh, Kádár and Mills 2013). Developing an understanding of politeness as social practice reflects this fast-growing body of research, which offers more credible alternatives to the traditional politeness paradigm in two key ways.

First, it allows for a much more nuanced range of approaches and methodologies to be drawn upon in furthering our understanding of politeness. We build here on the well-known first-order/second-order distinction in politeness research (see Chapters 3, 4 and 5) in proposing a framework that helps readers situate different perspectives on politeness, and see how they can be integrated into a more holistic approach to the analysis of politeness. Instead of defining **first-order politeness** as simply reflecting 'commonsense' or 'lay' perspectives, and **second-order politeness** as reflecting 'scientific' perspectives, we argue that any productive understanding of politeness is necessarily rooted in both, consistent with well-developed understandings of social practice in ethnomethodology and related fields. We propose a framework that breaks down different ways of understanding politeness into distinct perspectives, and which should, therefore, be useful for those approaching the complex field of politeness for the first time. In essence, our claim is that politeness can be analysed from the perspective of both participants (versus **metaparticipants**) and **emic** or 'insider' (versus **etic** or 'outsider') understandings (which are both first-order *user* perspectives), as well as from the perspective of analysts (versus lay observers) and theoretical (versus **folk-theoretic**) understandings (which are both second-order *observer* perspectives). These terms and the perspectives that they imply will be introduced in detail in Part I. Crucially, we do not place any inherent greater value on any one of these perspectives, but rather argue that *all* of these can in principle contribute to a holistic understanding of politeness.

Second, it allows us to go beyond the traditional focus on linguistic manifestations of politeness behaviour. We claim that a systematic presentation of politeness cannot ignore what has often been treated as something 'remaining' for future work because politeness permeates the very ways in which people interact: it is more than simply the use of linguistic **forms**. We only need to consider **rituals** (Kádár 2013) and the relationship between language and the senses (see Levinson 2003) or the rise of multimodal forms of computer-mediated interpersonal communication, for instance, to see that politeness often manifests itself as a social behavioural phenomenon beyond the boundaries of language. This broader focus is reflected in the wide range of data we use to illustrate and exemplify points in this book, which will include not only analyses of spoken face-to-face interaction, but also other modalities and modes, including various forms of **computer-mediated communication** (CMC) as well as different types of historical texts such as letters and invitation cards.

Our model of politeness as social practice also integrates various perceptions of politeness, thereby acknowledging the different worldviews they inevitably

encompass. In accordance with our claim that politeness is a social practice rather than a simple manifestation of language usage, we argue that politeness, as with any other practice, has to be described with reference to **time** and **space**. The concept of time underpins the claim that any understanding of politeness always arises relative to time, and so politeness in ongoing and historical interactions is necessarily interlinked. Our argument is that while politeness in interaction involves an understanding in the here-and-now, this here-and-now can also be understood in the sense of a current moment of talk being constrained and afforded by prior and subsequent talk. Furthermore, in many cases politeness does not come into existence simply through what is said in the moment, as many **social actions** and **pragmatic meanings** that are understood in locally situated contexts in fact follow pre-existing (often formalised) patterns. Finally, certain manifestations of politeness are historically situated, and so should be properly analysed in retrospection to trace how understandings of politeness in the here-and-now can never be totally divorced from understandings in the there and then. The importance of time should not be underestimated because these different temporal occurrences of politeness necessitate different conceptual and methodological approaches. For example, projecting an analysis of what took place diachronically from a synchronic perspective (or vice-versa) is problematic because such an approach may inadvertently decontextualise diachronic manifestations of politeness (see Chapter 8).

The concept of space here refers specifically to social space, which operates with reference to time, given that there is no space without time. Space in our understanding refers to the relationship between the individual and the society in which he or she lives, and thus provides a suitable grounding for the analysis of politeness with reference to cognition and culture. A linguistic phenomenon like politeness is an example *par excellence* of a social phenomenon that emerges through the ongoing, interlinked interactions of individuals. Just like language, then, we cannot trace politeness to any one single **person** or group of persons, but rather to the self-organising and **emergent** properties of the complex systems that form through ongoing interactions between persons over time and social space.

To sum up, it is hoped that the framework we offer here for analysing the multiple understandings of politeness, which inevitably arise when politeness is understood as social practice, and the conceptual links to time and social space we are making in grounding the analysis of these practices, will provide a working model by means of which the reader can approach politeness in different languages and contexts, without falling into the trap of overgeneralising. A treatment of politeness as arising from particular behaviours or linguistic forms can lead to overgeneralisations and even stereotyping. Approaching politeness as social practice, on the other hand, means that politeness can be systematically theorised and analysed within a wider research framework.

It is pertinent to note that, perhaps like any other book, the present volume has its limitations. Most importantly, we are primarily focused here on politeness. It can be observed that since the 2000s politeness researchers have increasingly recognised the importance of studying both politeness and impoliteness, and various frameworks (for example, Culpeper 2011a) have been exclusively devoted to the latter area. It has even been suggested that they require distinct theoretical frameworks. However, we are doubtful that it is really possible, in the final analysis, to talk about impoliteness without implicitly invoking politenesss, and vice-versa. For that reason, while much of our discussion focuses on instances where politeness is involved, we nevertheless draw from data that also include impoliteness phenomena. Indeed, in many instances the two are intertwined to the point that it makes little sense to rigidly separate them. In any case, it is our view that to focus exclusively on 'politeness' or 'impoliteness' ignores the multitude of other kinds of understandings vis-à-vis politeness that evidently arise in interaction. In some instances, something might be considered to be *mock* polite or *mock* impolite by participants. And it does not stop there. If asked for particular evaluations, participants may start talking about something being 'not polite' or 'not impolite', or 'neither polite nor impolite', 'overpolite' and so on and so forth. One wonders where such evaluations fit in if politeness and impoliteness are treated as completely distinct areas of theorisation. When we talk about politeness in this volume, then, we mean politeness as it is inevitably contextualised relative to impoliteness, mock politeness and the like by participants themselves.

## 1.2    Contents

The present book has three parts. Part I, 'Theoretical framework', is comprised of four chapters which give the reader an account of previous research on the field of politeness, and in which we introduce our analytical framework. Chapter 2 'The roots of politeness research', overviews the history and concepts of politeness research from its beginnings in the 1970s until the so-called recent discursive turn in the 2000s. We suggest that, like many other scholarly fields with history, politeness research can be metaphorically described as a tree. Current theories of politeness have been influenced by earlier models, which benchmarked the birth of the field, and indeed many of the underlying assumptions and concepts in those first-wave approaches to politeness continue to exist in various guises in more recently developed frameworks.

Chapter 3, 'Recent developments in politeness research', introduces more contemporary approaches to the study of politeness, from the 2000s onwards, an area that has generally been missing in most accounts of politeness in books on pragmatics to date. The new wave of research in this period is often referred to in the field as the 'discursive' turn, which was kick-started by Eelen's (2001)

influential monograph, and subsequently grounded in important monographs by Watts (2003) and Mills (2003). The discursive turn brought with it various important changes in the field, including, to mention just a few, an increasing reliance on longer fragments of authentic discourse (e.g. Watts 2003), and the exploration of (im)politeness as an interactionally constructed phenomenon (Locher 2004; Haugh 2007a). A focus on participants' understandings of politeness and a greater awareness of the analyst's role in elucidating these thus emerges as a key contribution of recent scholarship.

Chapter 4, 'Politeness as social practice', introduces an approach to understanding politeness as ultimately located in evaluations of social actions and meanings by persons that are situated relative to both time and social space. It is suggested that politeness constitutes a social practice because it involves evaluations that (implicitly) appeal to a **moral order**: a set of expectancies through which social actions and meanings are recognisable as such, and consequently are inevitably open to moral evaluation. It is proposed that, when understood in this way, politeness can be approached from the perspective of a number of disciplines and employ a wide range of methodologies. While various influential concepts and approaches have been proposed (see Chapter 3), there is not yet a clear overarching theoretical framework in which to situate these different understandings or perspectives. Theorising politeness as social practice enables us to account for the inherent diversity in understandings of politeness, without an appreciation of which we are likely to form essentialised or overgeneralised views on politeness.

Following Chapter 4's train of thought, Chapter 5, 'Understandings of politeness', explores the understandings of different users on politeness from various disciplinary perspectives by observers, including researchers who are aware of their own evaluations vis-à-vis those of the participants. Building on the overviews of traditional and more recent approaches to politeness in the previous chapters, we propose a framework that situates understandings of politeness relative to four key loci of understanding. It is suggested that the way in which the first-order/second-order distinction is generally drawn between participant and scientific understandings masks other important distinctions. Starting from the basic idea that the first-order/second-order distinction involves a distinction between *user* and *observer* understandings of politeness, it is proposed that there are in fact four key loci of understanding vis-à-vis politeness:

 (i) participant/metaparticipant understandings (first-order)
 (ii) emic/etic conceptualisations (first-order)
(iii) analyst/lay-observer understandings (second-order)
(iv) theoretical/folk-theoretic conceptualisations (second-order)

This framework allows readers to approach politeness from one perspective (or more) with greater awareness of what such a perspective offers as well as its natural limitations.

The three chapters in Part II, 'Politeness and time', are centred on how understandings of politeness inevitably arise relative to time. We focus on how such understandings can span different temporal settings, namely, the ongoing here-and-now in interaction (Chapter 6), the there-and-then projected into here-and-now through **recurrence** (Chapter 7) and the there-and-then historically situated in its own right (Chapter 8). Chapter 6, 'Politeness in interaction', argues that understandings of politeness, impoliteness and so on are co-constructed by two or more participants over the course of an interaction. To be co-constructed means that not only the speaker but also other participants can influence the *trajectory* of social actions/meanings and the evaluations of politeness they reflexively occasion as they develop in interaction. The upshot of this is that politeness must be analysed as situated in interaction, although it is important to note here that we conceptualise interaction not as isolated moments of the here-and-now but rather as inextricably linked to understandings of politeness in the there-and-then. In Chapter 6 we thus consider more deeply the various ways in which interaction in this broader sense, whether it be direct or mediated, both constrains and affords understandings of politeness.

Chapter 7 'Politeness, convention and rituality', examines **conventions** and rituals, and it introduces a concept of time that differs from that in Chapter 6. If we put politeness on a time scale, it can be argued understandings of politeness localised in a particular interaction involve an interlinking cycle of participant action and reaction, albeit drawing from a certain underlying set of moral expectancies. However, understandings of politeness are not always completely localised in this way: they can be formalised and pre-determined. Indeed, many contexts do not necessitate such localised understandings. A formal interaction between political leaders, for instance, represents a context in which understandings of politeness are less localised given the interactants are expected to follow certain (often scripted) **expectations**. In such contexts politeness tends to clearly follow certain underlying **schemata**: an organised pattern of thought and behaviour. These schemata reduce uncertainty in the formation and interpretation of linguistic politeness, due to the simple reason that by relying on them the interactants can invoke pre-existing ways of communicating and interpreting politeness. It can be argued that understandings of politeness drawing from such schemata represent a kind of pre-existing interpretive framework for understandings of politeness in the here-and-now.

Chapter 8, 'Politeness and history', argues for the **relativity** of politeness by examining understandings of politeness in historically situated interactions. Through exploring the notion of **historicity**, we argue that what we mean by 'historical' must be interpreted broadly, as historical interactions can include interactions that occurred a millennium before or just a few days ago (given we do not normally have access to prior interactions with the same mindset

as we had at the time of their occurrence). An analysis which is based on this broad definition of 'historical' can include various data types. For example, an email written some time ago can be regarded as 'historical' as a medieval codex. In terms of politeness and time, **historical politeness** constitutes the realm of there-and-then. Examining this there-and-then necessitates a specific approach, as the mindsets of interactants who communicated with each other before our time are often not readily accessible to us.

Finally, Part III, 'Politeness and social space: from mind to society', comprises three chapters which analyse the relationship between politeness and social space, spanning the realm of the individual to society and culture. Chapter 9, 'Politeness and metapragmatics', focuses on the study of awareness on the part of ordinary or lay observers about the ways in which they interact and communicate with others. It is argued that without systematically analysing the ways in which participants themselves generally conceptualise their own behaviour, we are not able to understand the social practices through which politeness arises. A focus on different forms of **metapragmatic awareness** also allows us to go beyond idiosyncratic understandings and to analyse the moral order that underpins politeness as social practice as an object of study in its own right.

Chapter 10, 'Politeness, cognition and emotion', overviews the key cognitive-state processes that have been held to underpin politeness from the perspective of individual cognition (**subjectivity**) and how it is interlinked with that of others (**intersubjectivity**). We focus, in particular, on notions that feature in sociocognitive or psychological accounts of politeness, such as attitude, **inference**, **intention**, as well as making links with Chapter 9 on metapragmatics. We conclude by arguing that politeness not only involves **rationality** and states of mind, as originally assumed in pre-2000 theories (or **first-wave approaches** to politeness, see Chapter 2), and indeed in much of the work on politeness to date, but is in fact inherently emotive.

Chapter 11, 'Culture, identity and politeness', examines the notion of culture from a critical perspective. We argue that in order to go beyond **essentialist** views on culture, one needs to analyse culture as a culturally constructed rather than an inherited property. Culture is inevitably construed as part of one's **identity**, and because of this it is relative to the individual's perception of her or his identity, even though this is also influenced by one's perceptions of norms. One's cultural identity is worked out primarily through the practices of **association** and **dissociation**: interactants take on certain cultural identities and refuse other ones in localised interactions. In discourse, then, culture can be used as a so-called **discursive resource**: it is invoked in order to gain the upper hand in an interaction or to focus on difference as opposed to similarity amongst persons, and in this sense also inevitably involves understandings of politeness and the like.

Chapter 12, 'Conclusion', briefly summarises the contents of the previous chapters and then discusses our views on the future direction of politeness research. The Conclusion is followed by a Glossary, an annotated list of the most important technical terms in politeness research.

## 1.3  Features

The present research-based volume is written for advanced readers and above who have a command of at least some key notions in pragmatics, such as the importance of context for understanding meaning, including meaning beyond what is said (for a useful introduction to basic concepts in pragmatics see, for example, Culpeper and Haugh, forthcoming). This book is thus primarily designed for academic readers wanting to brush up their understanding of the field in which they work, as well as senior undergraduate and postgraduate students who intend to make their way into linguistic politeness research.

While this book aims to propose a model for researchers, it is also meant to have educational value, and it thus includes a number of reader-friendly features. Along with the previously discussed innovative approach of treating politeness from multiple perspectives, we provide recommended readings in the form of annotated titles at the end of each chapter. Key concepts in the annotated Glossary are highlighted in bold on the first instance of their use, and thence in italics along with other key terms. In relation to data, we draw from a variety of different data types, including naturally occurring face-to-face conversational and CMC data, textual data and extracts from films. It is hoped that studying politeness arising in these different data types will provide insight for the reader into the diversity of politeness phenomena. Every chapter in Parts II and III thus also includes exercises at the end, by means of which readers can work through how one might analyse politeness in different types of discourse.

# 2    The roots of politeness research

## 2.1    Introduction

Like many other scholarly fields with a history, politeness research can be metaphorically described as a tree. Current theories of politeness have been influenced by earlier models which benchmarked the birth of the field. Indeed, earlier models continue to have an influence on the way in which politeness is described and studied, either directly, as some of these models continue to be used by researchers, or indirectly, as many of the approaches that have been subsequently developed clearly position themselves as counter or alternatives to these early theories. Using the tree analogy, earlier models of politeness are akin to the roots: they provide the fundamental starting point for understanding the field. In this chapter we will refer to these early models, following Jonathan Culpeper (2011b), as **first-wave approaches**. However, rather than reviewing the entire history of their development and reception in the field, we will concentrate on highlighting the key theoretical and methodological *assumptions* underlying these first-wave approaches.

In general, the first-wave approaches aimed to model politeness on a somewhat abstract, theoretical level. This reflects the way in which scientists usually approach hitherto unknown realms: they tend to rely on theoretical models, even though they maintain that the model is an abstraction of reality, and not the reality itself. Accordingly, it is an implicit assumption in all first-wave approaches that linguistic politeness can and should be modelled in abstract terms. While these various approaches differ in their detail, they all build on the seminal work of the language philosopher Herbert Paul Grice (1989[1975]) on **pragmatic meaning**, in particular, the so-called **Cooperative Principle** (CP), as the underlying conceptual basis of the models proposed.

According to Grice, interactants figure out what others are meaning, although not necessarily saying, in a principled way, based on normative expectations about communication. These normative expectations were summarised in the CP, which he formulated as follows: