Understanding Politeness

Politeness is key to all of our relationships and plays a fundamental part in the way we communicate with each other and the way we define ourselves. It isn’t limited only to conventional aspects of linguistic etiquette, but encompasses all types of interpersonal behaviour through which we explore and maintain our relationships. This groundbreaking exploration navigates the reader through this fascinating area and introduces them to a variety of new insights. The book is divided into three parts and is based on an innovative framework which relies on the concepts of social practice, time and space. In this multidisciplinary approach, the authors capture a range of user and observer understandings and provide a variety of examples from different languages and cultures. With its reader-friendly style, carefully constructed exercises and useful glossary, Understanding Politeness will be welcomed by both researchers and postgraduate students working on politeness, pragmatics and sociolinguistics more broadly.

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Understanding Politeness

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Foreword

‘What is it you are researching?? Politeness??? You teach ‘politeness’? You teach others how to be polite?? Mention ‘politeness’ as one of your research interests or topics you teach, and the reaction of many colleagues and friends is likely to be a mixture of incredulity, disbelief, mild condescendence and a hint of disapproval. Serious social scientists cannot possibly invest time and intellectual resources in the pursuit of what sounds like a topic for genteel conversation among members of a gone-by civil society inhabiting drawing-rooms and parlours!

Politeness as a topic of multidisciplinary inquiry has attracted the sustained attention of scholars for at least four decades; the effects of the discursive turn that has invested the social sciences have been felt in many of the recent monographic studies on manifestations of (im)politeness in various social contexts, a development that is indicative of a new vitality in the field. It is against this background that this book emerges to address new and non-expert readerships and to invite them on an exploration of the conceptual and empirical richness that have come to characterize politeness studies.

If we suspend for a minute the assumptions evoked by the term ‘politeness’ in English, and the taken-for-granted connotations invoked by the commonsense notion of ‘polite behaviour’, and turn probing incredulity towards the observation of everyday human interaction, a set of challenging and to date only partially answered questions begins to emerge. Why are we ‘polite’ to each other? What happens when ‘politeness’ is perceived to be missing? Ultimately, what is politeness?

In one of the rare definitions of politeness available in the English scholarly literature, Penelope Brown (2001: 11,620) observes that ‘Politeness is essentially a matter of taking into account the feelings of others as to how they should be interactionally treated, including behaving in a manner that demonstrates appropriate concern for interactors’ social status and their social relationship’ (added emphasis). Almost in the same breath, Brown unambiguously states that: ‘Since politeness is crucial to the construction and maintenance of social relationships, politeness in communication goes to the very heart of social life
and interaction; indeed it is probably a precondition for human cooperation in general’ (p. 11,620), added emphasis).

If we accept Brown’s bold understanding of the hugely influential role of politeness in human interaction and, ultimately, in the construction of the social order, it is somewhat surprising that it should have taken so long for scholars to write a research-based book that seeks to examine the manifestations of this elusive yet pervasive phenomenon in a language accessible to (post)graduate readers, and which at the same time provides an innovative framework for researchers.

It is not mere chance that filling this gap in the literature has befallen two outstanding scholars of the ‘new wave’ of politeness studies, Dániel Kádár and Michael Haugh. Their innovative, energetic approach to politeness is the hallmark of their comprehensive book, addressing the interests of a broad-based multidisciplinary readership. Without compromising on theoretical and analytical depth, and judiciously drawing from an established tradition of dedicated scholarship, this volume has the essential qualities to become ‘the’ new authoritative book on Politeness published in English, and therefore accessible to readerships worldwide.

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