PART I

Introduction

CHAPTER I

Im/Politeness Research in Ancient Greek and Latin
Concepts, Methods, Data

Luis Unceta Gómez and Łukasz Berger

I Introduction

This book gathers together a collection of chapters dealing with politeness and impoliteness phenomena, as they appear in the Classical languages. When approaching Greek and Roman societies through their texts, whether it is in a political letter or a theatrical play, our attention is frequently called by aspects of their daily lives, as encapsulated by linguistic habits and interactions. What do the available testimonies tell us about how those people relate to each other in talk? Did Classical Greek have any way to say 'please'? What were the common ways of teasing among friends in the times of Cicero? How was Roman politeness different from Greek politeness? What do we know about the formal language used in the courts? Did ancient scholars comment on politeness as well as on grammar?

   But what do we mean by the word 'politeness'? Very likely, if asked about 'politeness' in any language, one would immediately think of societal norms of conduct, good manners, or, at best, of conversational niceties (such as saying 'please' or 'thank you'); one would also take contraventions of those norms as 'impolite' or 'rude'. However, judgments about the politeness of a verbal or non-verbal behaviour are necessarily subjective and culture-specific, varying by individuals and across societies. An utterance I may have considered unnecessarily direct may be judged unobjectionable by another individual; what passes as rude among speakers of Northeast American English would not necessarily be considered as such by a speaker of English elsewhere. This variability in interpretation makes theorizing politeness notoriously tricky. As Locher (2006a: 264) observes, '[i]t lies in the nature of politeness to be an elusive concept since it is inherently linked to judgements and norms, and these are constantly negotiated, are renegotiated and change over time.'

Its elusive nature and resistance to a single approach have not deterred linguists from attempting to theorize politeness and impoliteness (henceforth im/politeness), which, precisely for its Protean resistance to the researcher's gaze, has become one of the hottest topics in Pragmatics, the subfield of linguistics that studies human language use in real-world contexts and communicative competence.[1] The first serious theoretical proposal was Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (first published in 1978; a second publication prefaced by a new introduction appearing in 1987). This was the study that introduced what continues to be the central preoccupation of politeness studies: the identification and analysis of linguistic strategies for managing and maintaining social relations, for avoiding interpersonal conflict, and for showing consideration towards others. These strategies take on a wide variety of manifestations:

> politeness is not limited to conventional acts of linguistic etiquette like formal apologies, so-called 'polite' language and address terms, although it includes all these acts. Rather, it covers something much broader, encompassing all types of interpersonal 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. (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 1)

The influential study by Brown and Levinson sparked vigorous interest and their theory has since undergone substantial revisions by other scholars, including those working on historical languages.[2] Classicists, too, have taken notice over the last decades. There is now a good number of papers and books dealing with im/politeness phenomena in Classical languages (some of which will be mentioned in this Introduction). To these previous studies, this book constitutes a contribution of its own: it contains thirteen studies each analysing particular aspects of im/politeness in Ancient Greek and Latin. When read together as a whole, they offer a broad-ranging perspective of the various manifestations of this phenomenon in both languages. The decision to pursue a collaboration among Hellenists and Latinists also offers the advantage of comparison between two historical languages; although they are characterized by different traits, they are genetically related (forming part of the same linguistic family, the Indo-European), they belong to the same cultural

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[1] The papers collected in Culpeper, Haugh and Kádár (2017) offer a complete and recent revision of Im/politeness Research.

[2] See Culpeper and Kádár (2010); Bax and Kádár (2011); Ridealgh (2016a; 2019).

area, and, even if their history and social structures differ widely, both cultures were intimately connected, influencing each other over the centuries.

Especially for readers unfamiliar with the subject, it will be essential now to retrace the development of Im/politeness Research from its beginnings. Thus, this chapter will offer first a general overview of this research field and then, more specifically for the Classicist, an introduction to the state of our knowledge about im/politeness phenomena in the Classical languages. It therefore will supply the context for the thirteen studies whose content will also be briefly summarized here. Because it is intended for readers unfamiliar with Im/Politeness Research, it is hoped that the theories, concepts and methods here presented provide not only an introduction to the field but an impetus to further exploration on im/politeness in the Classical languages.[3]

2   An Overview of Im/politeness Research

2.1   *'First Wave' or Early Models of Politeness: Lakoff, Leech, Brown and Levinson*

The study of the influence of politeness on linguistic expression can be found in the very origins of Pragmatics as a scientific discipline. For example, in Searle's (1969) studies on **speech acts** – specific communicative actions that we carry out when speaking, such as requesting, advising or thanking –, politeness is used as an explanation for the indirect nature of such conventional utterances as the formula 'Could you pass me the salt?' (instead of the blunter 'Pass me the salt'), or 'It is cold in here', when trying to get the addressee to close a window. However, politeness was only a secondary interest, until several researchers concerned with the social thrust of communication made it their primary object of study and produced the so-called 'first wave' of politeness studies.

The first of these researchers was Lakoff (1973), who stressed the importance of the social context in which any utterance is made, as well as the assumptions that are implicitly shared by the participants in a

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[3] Im/Politeness Research is undoubtedly one of the Linguistic disciplines with greatest self-awareness, subject to constant self-reflection about its essence and its fundamental concepts, theories and methodologies. There have been many critical state-of-the-art reviews in recent years, including Kasper (1990); Watts (2005a [1992]); Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2010a); Culpeper (2011a); Locher (2012); and Haugh (2018a). The recent proliferation and dissemination of theoretical proposals has also forced metatheorization in Im/Politeness Research; in this regard see Kádár and Haugh (2013: 81–105) and Haugh (2018b).

communicative act. Inspired by Grice's 'Cooperative Principle' and its conversational maxims,[4] Lakoff proposes that speakers not only have linguistic competence, but also **pragmatic competence**, which she encapsulates in two new pragmatic rules derived from this type of interactional constraint: 'Be clear' and 'Be polite'. These two maxims stand in conflict with each other, for indirect speech, like 'Can you pass the salt?', is less clear than the alternative *Pass the salt*, but the former request is generally considered more polite. Thus, Lakoff observes of Grice's assumptions that they are more often followed in their breach than in their observance. In fact, according to Lakoff, speakers prioritize politeness over clarity, and she subdivides her pragmatic rule 'Be polite' into three: 'Don't impose', 'Give options' and 'Make the other feel good, be friendly' (Lakoff 1973: 298).

Both Lakoff (1973) and later Leech (1983) use Grice's ideas to understand the lack of direct correspondence between a message's 'communicative intent' (e.g. to get the addressee to pass the salt) and the 'meaning' to be straightforwardly interpreted from the utterance; that is, 'Can you pass the salt?' is quite literally a question about the addressee's ability to pass the salt. Leech asks us to derive the intended meaning (in the parlance, **illocutionary force**[5]) 'Pass the salt' from the utterance 'Can you pass the salt?', by proposing a **Politeness Principle**. That is, because I assume you are taking my feelings into account, I can correctly interpret 'Can you pass the salt?' as a less brusque way of getting across the underlying request.

Politeness, for Leech is particularly relevant in two cases. First, when the speaker's intention – to make someone to pass the salt – conflicts directly with a social goal, namely that individuals feel valued; and second – contrastingly – when the speaker's desire (for instance to offer something or invite the addressee) coincides with the social goal (Leech 1983: 104). In the first case, when the speaker's goal stands in direct conflict with the social goal, polite acts and utterances seek a balance between the speaker's interests and good social relations, by minimizing

[4] The Cooperative Principle is expressed by Grice (1975) as 'Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged', and it is further divided into four maxims: namely that (1) the speaker will be truthful ('maxim of quality'); (2) the contribution will offer just as much information as needed, and not more ('maxim of quantity'); (3) the contribution is relevant to the accepted purpose of the exchange ('maxim of relation or relevance'); and (4) the contribution will be clear and unambiguous ('maxim of manner'). Grice himself (1975: 47) also recognized that another assumption – to be polite – must also be operative in human spoken exchange but left that notion for others to develop.

[5] Searle (1975) classified illocutionary acts as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations.

the potential inconsideration that the addressee might perceive from the speech act. When the speaker's goals and the social one coincide, the message conveys deference to the hearer.[6]

The Politeness Principle, therefore, is conceived as an element that regulates social relations. Thus, interlocutors must take into account features of the social interaction, including the relative power between the interlocutors and the social distance, determined by more or less fixed factors (age, familiarity, etc.), but also by the relative role adopted by each interlocutor in a given communicative act.[7]

Leech recognizes that a fundamental characteristic of politeness is its asymmetrical nature, and explains interactional behaviours using a 'cost-benefit' scale. In other words, the greater the benefit to the addressee, the lesser the intrinsic impoliteness of the act in question. The reason is simple: indirect formulations allow the hearer more room to evade the intended message.

Leech's ideas have not been as influential as Brown and Levinson's, but they have been applied to Latin (Uría 2007; Brookins 2010). In this volume, Hall makes use of a Leechian maxim-driven approach in his analysis of banter and teasing in Latin.

We violate chronological order to summarize now Brown and Levinson's model after Leech's (1983), because the 1987 republication of Brown and Levinson's (1978) work became (and undoubtedly continues to be) the most complete, most explanatory theory of linguistic politeness phenomena. Their theoretical framework combines the theory of speech acts (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) with Grice's (1975) conversational implicatures, and is based on a number of properties of language usage that they consider to be systematic and universal.

Their proposal revolves around the concept of '**face**', conceived as the public self-image held out by each member of a community.[8] Each speaker's face, however, is not immutable, and must be renegotiated in the

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[6] In elaborating these concepts, Leech (1983: 102, n. 1) explicitly recognizes his debt to Brown and Levinson's (1978) framework. The two proposals, however, present certain initial conceptual discrepancies; see Brown and Levinson's (1987: 4–5) critique of Leech's model.

[7] Leech subsequently reworked his model (2007, 2014: 80–111) in response to allegations of ethnocentrism.

[8] The authors borrow this concept from Goffman (1967), who defines it as follows: 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [*sic*] by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself' (Goffman 1967: 5). It is also worth noting that Mari (2016) has revived Goffman's categories for analysing a passage from the *Odyssey*.

process of each interaction; in other words, its upkeep is the responsibility of both self and other, who cooperate in supporting each other's face during the course of any interaction, simply because it is mutually advantageous. '**Facework**' is the cumbersome term that embraces the various words and actions that self and other take to mutually support the other's face (Goffman 1967: 12). As Brown and Levinson put it:

> Face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume others' cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61)

The concept of face comprises two opposing but complementary facets: **negative face**, 'the want of every "competent adult member" that his [*sic*] actions be unimpeded by others', and **positive face**, 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 62). Each speaker's face, however, is not immutable, and must be renegotiated in the process of each interaction. For this reason, in every linguistic act, the speakers must adapt their utterance to the objectives pursued.

Given that, also in this model, many linguistic acts are intrinsically face-threatening, either to the speaker's face or the addressee's face, politeness is conceived as the set of compensatory behaviours that try to avoid or mitigate **face-threatening acts**, that is to say, 'acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 65). Brown and Levinson classify face-threatening acts according to the following criteria:

(i) Those that show that S[peaker] has a negative evaluation of some aspect of H[earer]'s positive face:
   (a) expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints and reprimands, accusations, insults (S indicates that he doesn't like/want one or more of H's wants, acts, personal characteristics, goods, beliefs or values)
   (b) contradictions or disagreements, challenges (S indicates that he thinks H is wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue, such wrongness being associated with disapproval)
(ii) Those that show that S doesn't care about (or is indifferent to) H's positive face:
   (a) expressions of violent (out of control) emotions (S gives H possible reason to fear him or be embarrassed by him)

(b) irreverence, mention including those that are inappropriate in the context (S indicates that he doesn't value H's values and doesn't fear H's fears)

(c) bringing of bad news about H, or good news (boasting) about S (S indicates that he is willing to cause distress to H, and/or doesn't care about H's feelings)

(d) raising of dangerously emotional or divisive topics, e.g. politics, race, religion, women's liberation (S raises the possibility or likelihood of face-threatening acts (such as the above) occurring; i.e. S creates a dangerous-to-face atmosphere)

(e) blatant non-cooperation in an activity – e.g. disruptively interrupting H's talk, making non-sequiturs or showing non-attention (S indicates that he doesn't care about H's negative or positive-face wants)

(f) use of address terms and other status-marked identifications in initial encounters (S may misidentify H in an offensive or embarrassing way, intentionally or accidentally). (Brown and Levinson 1987: 66–7)

In order to carry out these acts, the speaker can make use of different linguistic strategies, summarized in Figure 1.1.

First of all, the speaker can decide to transmit his/her message '**off record**', that is, to express it in a way that 'there is more than one unambiguously attributable intention so that the actor cannot be held to have committed himself [*sic*] to one particular intent' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69). But if one decides to carry out the face-threatening act '**on record**', that is, in a way that makes the communicative objectives obvious to the participants, one may convey the message as '**bald on**
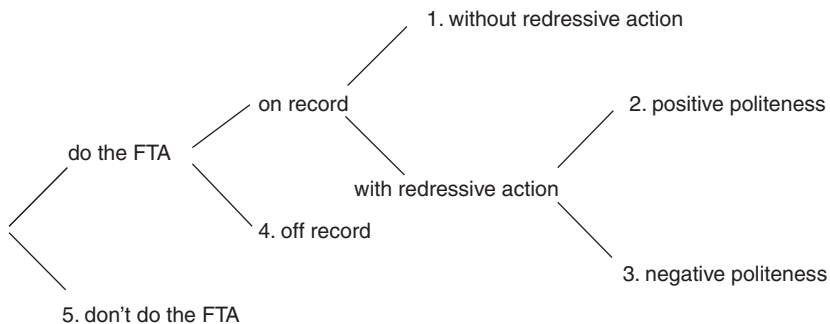

Figure 1.1   Politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson 1987: 69)

record, without redress',[9] or resort to '**redressive action**'. In the latter case, the speaker has two types of available strategies:

> **Positive politeness** is redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his perennial desire that his wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 101)
>
> **Negative politeness** is redressive action appealing to the addressee's negative face: his want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 129)

Brown and Levinson thus conceive politeness as essentially and exclusively consisting in the avoidance of face-threat. In selecting politeness strategies, the speaker must consider three factors that account for the degree of threat entailed in a particular communicative act, allowing him or her to choose an adequate level of politeness. The first of them is the '**social distance**' between speaker and hearer, a symmetrical relationship that includes factors like familiarity and the frequency of interaction between the interlocutors. The second is their '**relative power**' – an asymmetrical relationship pertaining to the 'degree to which H can impose his own plans and his own self-evaluation (face) at the expense of S's plans and self-evaluation' – and the absolute '**ranking of impositions**' in the particular culture, defined by the 'degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval (his [*sic*] negative- and positive-face wants)' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 77). Regarding this last parameter, the authors explain:

> In general there are probably two such scales or ranks that are emically identifiable for negative-face FTAs [face-threatening acts]: a ranking of impositions in proportion to the expenditure (a) of services (including the provision of time) and (b) of goods (including non-material goods like information, as well as the expression of regard and other face payments). (Brown and Levinson 1987: 77)

Despite the differences between the maxim- and face-based theories we have just described, it is possible to recognize some underlying common elements: (1) all these theories appeal to social motives to explain

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[9] There are several circumstances that explain this choice: the urgency of the message, which overrules the importance of face; if the threat to the addressee's face is minimal, or the communicative acts are beneficial to the interlocutor's face (offers, advice, etc.); if the speaker is in a superior hierarchical position, and so on.

linguistic variation; (2) they adhere to the Gricean paradigm, which recognizes the disconnect between the straightforward utterance 'meaning' and the underlying speaker intent, with politeness offering the means to derive 'intent' from literal meaning; and (3) they consider their affirmations to be universally applicable.

As we shall see (Section 2.2), all these assumptions have been sharply criticized, and particularly the validity of Brown and Levinson's framework has been challenged on numerous occasions. Even so, the main advantage of their proposal, as Locher (2012: 41) indicates, is that 'it gives researchers a clearly delineated set of tools to apply to new sets of data in the endeavour to understand the global patterns of pragmatic competence' (regarding Latin, see also Dickey 2012a, 2016a). Thus, this theoretical model continues to have its supporters, and many researchers consider that, with appropriate adjustments and supplemented with other notions, it continues to be a theory with great explanatory potential, thanks to the robustness of its conceptual structure and its predictive potential.[10]

Accordingly, it is not surprising that this theory has been most frequently applied to the Classical languages (see e.g. Lloyd 2006; Roesch 2004), where its explanatory potential gains particular relevance. Many of these studies have taken the speech act as the fundamental starting point for research. In particular, certain pioneering applications of the concept of politeness in ancient languages came about in the study of directive speech acts – linguistic acts, like orders, requests, begging or advice, that seek to trigger a specific reaction in the interlocutor, hence a paradigmatic example of an act that threatens the addressee's negative face – both in Latin (Risselada 1993; Unceta Gómez 2009; see also Barrios-Lech 2016: 23–109), and in Greek (Denizot 2011).[11] Moreover, Brown and Levinson's model (1987) has served as the basis for what is to date the only theoretical framework proposed for an ancient language (Latin), namely the work by Hall (2009), which will be discussed with more detail further on (Section 4). All the studies in this volume to some

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[10] See the neo-Brown and Levinsonian approach proposed by Grainger (2018). Van der Bom and Mills (2015: 180) 'have noticed a "return to Brown and Levinson", both in terms of the numbers of PhD theses submitted recently […] and in terms of journal articles and other publication outputs which draw explicitly on Brown and Levinson's model […], albeit seemingly modified by a (discursive) critical approach'.

[11] Other speech acts have also been analysed, such as apologies (Kruschwitz and Clary-Venables 2013; Unceta Gómez 2014a), expressions of thanks (Quincey 1966; Unceta Gómez 2010); and advice-giving (Berger 2017b, 2021a), among others. Latin (see the state of the art in Unceta Gómez 2018) has been more extensively analysed from this perspective than Greek.