Politeness, Impoliteness and Ritual

Ritual is popularly associated with ceremonies, though, in real life, it plays a significantly more important role, reinforcing what people perceive as the appropriate moral order of things, or challenging what they perceive as the inappropriate flow of events. This book introduces the reader to how people use ritual in interpersonal interaction, and the interface that exists between ritual and politeness and impoliteness. As rituals have a large impact on the life of individuals and communities, the way in which they use politeness and impoliteness in a ritual action significantly influences how the given ritual is perceived.

Ritual, Politeness and Impoliteness examines this complex relationship by setting up a multi-layered analytic model, with a multidisciplinary approach which will appeal to interaction scholars, politeness researchers, social psychologists, and anthropologists. It fills an important knowledge gap and provides the first (im)politeness-focused interactional model of ritual.

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Maintaining the Moral Order in Interpersonal Interaction

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Preface

I

This book is written primarily for academics who already have some background in the field of linguistic politeness research. This Preface, on the contrary, is aimed at those educated readers – including graduate students and readers with intellectual interest in the theme of the book – who do not have such a background and who nevertheless wish to read *Politeness, Impoliteness, and Ritual*. In this longer-than-usual Preface, perhaps in a way that some may find unconventional, I attempt to provide an overview of the field of politeness research and the role that ritual, in my view, plays in it, to position the model presented in the book in a relatively simple way. Experts in the area may want to skip the Preface and start reading the book from Chapter 1, even though the Foreword's Sections II and III may be relevant to academics who are involved in politeness research but not in ritual studies.

Linguistic politeness research is a field (primarily) within pragmatics – the study of language use – which aims to study the (predominantly linguistic) ways through which people manage to get along with one another. Politeness, therefore, means something more to a researcher than what the lexeme 'politeness' popularly indicates: along with manifestations of what is regarded as 'good manners', it includes all types of interpersonal behaviour by means of which interpersonal relationships are built up and maintained, and through which people indicate that they take others' feelings of how they should be treated into account. Politeness is also an ideologically loaded notion, which people use (and abuse) as a reference point as they think and talk about language use.

Politeness research has become a field of high impact following the success of the seminal monograph of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson: *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987). Brown and Levinson's work has drawn attention to the fact that politeness (as understood in the technical sense) is a fundamental interactional phenomenon, which binds human beings together across languages and cultures. Brown and Levinson, and subsequent researchers, have revealed that the study of politeness and

impoliteness raises many academic questions, such as whether or not one can describe similarities of these phenomena across languages and cultures in a systematic way, and whether or not it is possible to rationalise politeness and impoliteness behaviour through a particular universal pattern.

In the centre of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory – and the bulk of research that this model has generated – is the notion that people collaborate in meaning making. This sense of cooperation, which permeates politeness theory, comes from the language philosopher Paul Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle (CP). The CP stipulates that in meaning making, interactants seek the most effective method, and also that in interaction, both the speaker and the hearer observe this principle. Politeness is claimed to come into existence when a speaker disobserves the CP (this is often called 'flouting' in the field). For example, if one wants to say something positive to the other, one may deviate from the most effective way of communication, by saying more than what is simply required to convey the information (e.g. 'Good job, well done mate!' instead of 'You have completed the task'). The person who disobserves the CP in such a way presupposes that this flouting may be interpreted ('inferred') as polite because his speech partner also observes the CP and interprets such flouts in conventionalised ways, as manifestations of polite intention. Thus, the operation of both the CP and politeness is bound to individual logic, which follows conventional patterns and as such is not necessarily arbitrary.

Rationalising politeness as a phenomenon that comes into existence through flouting the CP has generated a number of key analytic concepts, which have been widely used in the field. To avoid overcomplicating this brief introduction to politeness research, let us focus here on three concepts that play a central role in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework. Brown and Levinson's is the most influential among various politeness theories that have come into existence under the influence of Grice's theory, and which are often referred to as 'first-wave' politeness theories. Readers with further interest in a basic overview of first-wave politeness theory (and the concept of 'waves' in politeness research) may want to consult an open-access online article on politeness theory, which I have published recently (see Kádár, forthcoming).

First, a speaker flouts the CP as (s)he is aware of the other's *face wants*. In Brown and Levinson's theory, *face* refers to one's public self-image, and politeness is understood to come into existence in the form of *positive and negative politeness strategies*, which appeal to the other's *positive and negative face wants*. Positive face want refers to the wish to be appreciated by others, while negative face want describes the wish to be left unimpeded by others. For example, the utterance 'Good job, well done mate!' is a typical manifestation of a positive politeness strategy, while 'I'm sorry to disturb you, but . . . ' represents how negative politeness strategies work. Second, the operation of politeness behaviour interpreted in this way presupposes that there is an interactional

situation, which needs the deployment of politeness strategies. In Brown and Levinson's framework, this need is described through the concept of *face-threatening acts*: one may utilise a politeness strategy if one believes that the other's face is under threat. For example, one may use the previously mentioned positive politeness strategy 'Good job, well done mate!' (praising the other) when one is disappointed with the other for not completing a certain task but feels satisfied with this person's completion of another task, that is, as one perceives that the other's positive face needs to be enhanced. One may use the negative politeness strategy 'I'm sorry to disturb you, but . . .' (hedging a request) when one perceives that one's request threatens the other's negative face. Third, individual *rational* perception of contextual needs and affordances plays a key role in the operation of the CP-based rationalisation of politeness: a variety of strategies are available for the speaker to cope with a given face-threatening situation, and it is likely that the speaker will attempt to choose a strategy with the most ideal payoff.

This CP-based understanding of politeness has been subject to thorough criticisms, in particular, after the 2000s. In the second millennium, the field received a boost with the appearance of what tends to be described as the 'second wave' of politeness research; this research wave has appeared largely under the influence of Gino Eelen's (2001) groundbreaking book *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. The second wave of politeness research has made various key methodological innovations, such as refocusing the examination of politeness onto the level of discourse instead of utterances, and bringing impoliteness into the scope of research (as a result of the latter, academics often refer to the field as '(im)politeness' or 'im/politeness research'). Even more importantly, second-wave politeness research has questioned the validity of rationalising politeness as a strategic form of interpersonal behaviour that purely addresses instances of face threat. On the one hand, various researchers have pointed out that the conceptualisation of (im)politeness in terms of rational payoffs reflects a particular – Western and individualistic – understanding of 'rationality' (and the same is valid for the Brown and Levinsonian understanding of face). On the other hand, it has been argued that various factors may influence the use and interpretation of (im)politeness, such as a person's emotions, the relational history of the interactants, and so on; these factors are difficult to capture only through the lenses of payoffs. These criticisms imply that (im)politeness behaviour is not fully modellable – at least if modellability means the researcher's analytic skill to systematically predict the (im)polite effect of a certain utterance outside a particular context. This is all the more the case because, while the speaker's productive intention is important in the operation of (im)politeness, ultimately this phenomenon comes into existence through evaluative moments, that is, moments within an interaction when one evaluates the other's behaviour as 'polite' or 'impolite'. As the operation of politeness is

not exclusively governed by the logic of mitigating face threat vis-à-vis conventional flouts of the CP, (im)politeness may also emerge in idiosyncratic forms. In second-wave politeness research, interactional idiosyncrasy has received perhaps even more attention than normative behaviour.

While the second wave of politeness research has brought plenty of new ideas into the field, in a sense it has raised more issues than it has solved. CP-based approaches to politeness and impoliteness have had a special strength in providing macro-level *models* of (im)politeness: by using the CP as the driving force of interpersonal politeness, it is possible to explain the logic and default operation of (im)politeness (at least, to a certain extent). However, once the CP loses its exclusive role as the interpretive frame of (im)politeness phenomena, the question emerges as to whether it is possible to set up macro models of (im)politeness at all. This has been a central problem in the second wave of politeness research, and it recurs in a number of high-impact studies such as Richard Watts's (2003) *Politeness*. Essentially, by drawing attention to problems of limiting the rationalisation of politeness to CP, and by focusing on idiosyncratic rather than normative behaviour, second-wave politeness researchers have created a void in the field. In second-wave research, no macro-level framework has been offered that could take the place of the broadly (and often rightly) criticised CP-based theories, in particular that of Brown and Levinson's (1987) work.

A number of scholars have attempted to reinstate the focus on the macro level of politeness and impoliteness without compromising the methodological and theoretical innovations that have been attained in the second wave of the field. Among other publications, such as Jonathan Culpeper's (2011) seminal *Impoliteness*, and Helen Spencer-Oatey's (2000 [2008]) relational approach to interpersonal interaction, the perhaps most representative work within this area has been done by Marina Terkourafi (2005). My previous books *Understanding Politeness* (2013, with Michael Haugh) and *Relational Rituals and Communication* (2013) also represent such third-wave attempts. Although labelling research approaches unavoidably raises problems, it may make sense to refer to such research as the 'third wave' of politeness research. Works that aim to go beyond the second-wave worldview may greatly vary in their theoretical and methodological approaches; however, a common characteristic of these studies is that they attempt to model politeness and impoliteness in terms of interactional productive and evaluative *tendencies*. That is, without denying the existence and importance of idiosyncratic behaviour, third-wave theories attempt to set up models that are not prescriptive by nature, but which can capture the macro tendencies of the production and evaluation of (im)politeness.

This book provides a post–second-wave research framework: my aim is to capture the broad interface that exists between politeness, impoliteness,

and the key interpersonal phenomenon of ritual. I attempt to set up a theoretical framework that can rationalise the operational tendencies of ritual, and (im)politeness situated in/triggered by ritual behaviour, without making predictions about the interactional effect of particular ritual forms of behaviour. A weakness of CP-based theories of (im)politeness is that they are predictive by nature: they describe the operation of (im)politeness exclusively in a means-ends way, and by assuming that a particular logic will apply in any interactional situation. Thus, even though these theories acknowledge contextual variability, they unavoidably predict the interpersonal effect of a certain form of politeness in a given situation – a point which has been rightly criticised in second-wave politeness research. Accordingly, my goal is not to provide a manual which tells the reader that if a person performs ritual action *x*, he will generate polite or impolite inference *y*. Instead, by using larger datasets of naturally occurring data, I aim to set up a replicable model that can help the reader analyse what is happening, in terms of politeness and impoliteness, in ritual interaction. In addition, I aim to capture the occurrences that set ritual action in operation. In other words, the model proposed here is suitable, in my view, (a) to capture ritual interaction in various data types, spanning computer-mediated communication, through face-to-face talk, to ceremonies and (b) to analyse the interpersonal function of ritual in terms of politeness and impoliteness. These are not straightforward tasks: popularly, ritual is associated with ceremonies and outside the realm of ritual research, it is rarely recognised how important rituals can be in our modern daily lives. But why is this important?

II

In Chapter 1, I provide a complex definition of ritual, and here I describe what I regard as the most representative characteristics of this phenomenon. Ritual can be a ceremony or any kind of scripted language that people use on special occasions; this accords with popular understandings of 'ritual' as a word. However, ritual also includes seemingly freely (co-)constructed interactions; for example, inviting a person whom one finds attractive to the cinema or to dinner is a typical sexual rite of courting, while proposing to the other to 'come outside' in a pub can be a rite of challenge that precedes a fight. Thus, while there is a popular belief that rituals represent historical rather than modern forms of interpersonal behaviour, in fact they play as important a role in modern daily lives as in historical times, even though the forms and style of ritual practices may change across space and time.

Ritual, in my view, is a practice through which people maintain the order of things in various social structures, spanning an encounter between individuals, through groups, to representatives of a whole society. This order of things is usually referred to in anthropology as the 'moral order', following the

groundbreaking works of Mary Douglas (1999) and Robert Whutnow (1989). Here I do not venture into a refined definition of the moral order – I leave this to Chapter 1 – but essentially this concept refers to the perceived aggregated obligations and affordances of individuals within a community, and communities within a society, which manifest themselves in norms and rules by means of which we keep things in their place. For instance, the previously mentioned practice of inviting someone to a cinema reflects perceptions of obligations and affordances: a couple-to-be may engage in the ritual game of watching films because in many societies it is perceived as 'proper' to build up sexual relationships in a gradual way. While one could in principle be more direct in sexual advance, we usually inherit perceptions such as that the other may find us 'pushy' (or something worse) if we fail to build up intimate relationships gradually – that is, our actions tend to be influenced by moral feelings that come from our perceived social duties. The word 'perceived' should be emphasised here: as moral psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt (2012) make clear, the moral perceptions of a particular situation – which validate the performance of a ritual – are intuitive. In addition to the upholding of norms, ritual can help reorder norms and rules, hence forming new moral orders. Ritual is far from being the only phenomenon by means of which the moral order is created and maintained; however, anthropologists largely agree that it is perhaps the most important one among such tools. Ritual is basically a performance; that is, it comes into existence in front of a real or an imaginary audience. By performing rituals, members of a community reinforce an existing moral order, or transgressively create a new moral order, or do both at the same time. Even in cases in which a ritual changes an existing moral order from an individual's point of view, it is very likely that it will reinforce the moral order of the broader community at the same time, provided that the broader community endorses the ritual. This is why it is worth approaching ritual as an interactional phenomenon by means of which the moral order is *maintained* (see the subtitle of this book), that is, to use 'maintenance' in a collective sense to describe the various functions of ritual in terms of the moral order. For example, by performing the rite of a graduation ceremony, a university reinforces its own moral order as a higher educational institution, while it creates a new moral order for the graduate whose status undergoes a major change and who will have new social rights and obligations. As a matter of course, this is a simple example, and, as this book will show, the reinforcement of existing moral orders and the change/creation of new moral orders are often far from being explicit from the observer's point of view. However, the ritual nature of an interaction tends to be explicit to those who participate in it: any ritual that is endorsed by a community is an action that animates an interactional practice of that community. As such, it operates with formal and sequential features that tend to be clearly recognisable to the participants. Since rituals play an

important role in human lives, because of their function in the maintenance of the moral order, they bring the participants into an altered state of mind; this state is often described by using the technical term 'liminal' (see more in Chapter 1).

If we accept that rituals are important interactional phenomena, the next question that one needs to ask is why are they important from the perspective of politeness and impoliteness? In my view, the three main answers to this question are interrelated.

First, as has been mentioned already, a ritual, which is endorsed by at least the majority of those who participate in it, is an action with its roots in a practice of a certain social structure (such as a group of people of a particular size), or cluster of social structures (such as a network of groups). In a sense, ritual is an action that is *meant to happen*: the ratified or self-nominated representative of a community performs a ritual if and when he perceives that the course of events calls for it from a communal point of view. In some cases, it is self-evident why a ritual is meant to happen: in the previously mentioned case of a graduation ceremony, it is inevitable that a university will provide a formal rite of passage to those who successfully completed a course. In other cases, the reason why a ritual occurs may be less clear from an observer point of view: for example, a group of schoolchildren may ritually abuse a member of their group by making recurrent attacks on him. Such behaviour, as any ritual, is meant to reinforce the group's moral order: as social psychology reveals, cases of in-group abuse take place when the targeted person sticks out from the group, hence violating the group's perceived moral order, and so the punitive ritual may continue until the targeted person accepts what the group perceives as the normative form of in-group behaviour (or is expelled from the group). While moral feelings can be completely utilitarian, for example, the ringleader of such school abuse may profit from getting a competitor expelled from the group, the ringleader may actually believe that his action is rightful, and he will need to have his feelings shared by others for the ritual to operate. Since ritual actions thus animate a communal rather than an individual voice, it is challenging to capture them only by focusing on individual decisions and forms of behaviour; the raison d'être of ritual to interactionally succeed is communal endorsement. As previously mentioned, CP-based frameworks approach politeness through the lenses of individual logic; in second-wave politeness research, this focus on individual logic has been criticised. Second-wave research also tends to examine the operation of politeness through the individual speaker's production and evaluation of (im)politeness. In addition, second-wave politeness research pursues interest in idiosyncratic behaviour. It is difficult to approach the operation of ritual through individualistic frameworks, which examine the relationship between the interactants only, as rituals tend to have a complex participant structure because of their communal nature. Also, as ritual

represents a practice of a group of people and it needs endorsement, its study does not fit into frameworks that focus on idiosyncratic behaviour: an action that animates a practice is unlikely to gain overtly idiosyncratic characteristics. This is where, in my view, the power of ritual resides from the perspective of the politeness researcher: by examining this phenomenon, it is possible to capture tendencies of interpersonal politeness and impoliteness behaviour, hence contributing to politeness theorisation that aims to study (im)politeness phenomena on the macro level.

Second, ritual has a complex relationship with politeness and impoliteness. Ritual action maintains the moral order of a social structure or a cluster of such structures; as a result of this, ritual can work in favour of the recipient (e.g. in the previous case of a graduation ceremony) or against the recipient (e.g. in the previously discussed case of in-group bullying). Thus, a ritual action triggers default polite ('nice', 'great', 'honouring', etc.) and/or impolite ('horrible', 'humiliating', etc.) evaluations, depending on its effect on the recipient. The performer of the ritual, the representative of the community, tends to be aware of the immediate interpersonal effect of the ritual action, and the evaluation that the ritual action triggers in terms of politeness and impoliteness, and it is possible for her or him to make the ritual sound more or less polite to influence or even manipulate the recipient's perceptions of the ritual action. For a number of reasons that I outline in the main text of this book, I call such attempts to influence the recipient 'fringing' behaviour. The performer of the ritual can operate fringing behaviour only to a certain extent: he can make use of it to personalise the meant-to-happen ritual, but only to the extent to which the ritual still operates as the sound box of the community's voice. Fringing behaviour may or may not take place in a given interaction, and it has two noteworthy characteristics from the perspective of the politeness researcher. On the one hand, polite fringing behaviour is highly expected in a number of settings, and its lack tends to be evaluated in immoral terms. For example, if an employer performs a rite of dismissal without attempting to decrease the pain that this act may cause, it is likely that the act of dismissal will be regarded as 'soulless', 'inhumane', and so on. On the other hand, impolite fringing is not regarded as improper in *every* case: if such behaviour is regarded as the only way to restore the moral order of a community, it tends to be accepted and can even be evaluated positively. For example, if an employer uses a saliently abrupt way to perform a rite of dismissal following the employee previously attempting to sexually harass his or her colleague, such a form of situated behaviour is likely to be endorsed by the community, as it fulfils people's moral expectations.

Third, as a result of its intrinsic relationship with the moral order, ritual tends to be perceived through the lens of morality, and such perceptions also manifest themselves in metapragmatic behaviour, that is, reflections on language use in ritual interactions. In politeness research, the moral order has recently been

adopted in a number of studies as a technical term to describe the cluster of social and personal values that underlies people's production and interpretation of (im)polite actions. Methodologically, the examination of moral order has been anchored to conversation analysis – the study of the features and organisation of interactions. That is, the existing literature on (im)politeness and moral order has studied the moral order *within* particular interactions, by exploring particular productions and evaluations of (im)politeness as reflection to/manifestations of the interactants' perceived moral order(s). This approach to the moral order is important, but the examination of ritual triggers an alternative focus on this phenomenon, namely the examination of the contextual necessities that trigger the performance of a ritual action in general. As ritual is a response to a perceived communal moral need, its study requires the analyst to look into perceptions of morality and interpersonal relationships within the broader context, as well as the moral psychological factors that motivate individuals to perform a ritual. Typical questions that we need to answer include the following: What happened that motivated the interactants to perform a ritual? Why do the interactants believe that it is important to perform a particular ritual in a certain polite or impolite way, and how are their feelings being evidenced on the level of language use? Thus, the study of ritual and (im)politeness brings new discourse analytic and moral psychological elements into the research of the moral order and (im)politeness, without contradicting what has been previously argued about the phenomenon of moral order in the field: similarly to previous research, the examination of the moral order of ritual needs us also to look into what is happening within a particular interaction.

III

The model presented in this book aims to bring together the previously discussed three characteristics of ritual – its nature as a practice of a community (and the potentially complex participation structure that this communal characteristic entails), its intriguing relationship with (im)politeness, and its moral nature – within a single framework. The model is presented in two major steps. In Part I of the book (Chapters 1–4), I overview the default operation of ritual in terms of politeness and impoliteness by examining the (im)polite fringing of rituals, as well as the lack of fringing behaviour. Readers who intend to use this book to obtain a basic knowledge about the pragmatics of ritual may be able to conclude their reading at Chapter 4, as Part I provides a self-contained framework.

Part II engages in the examination of 'moral aggression', cases in which a ritual action which has a negative (and consequently, by default, impolite) effect on the recipient is regarded as the only/most efficient way to maintain the

moral order of a community. This phenomenon of moral aggression takes place quite often in our daily lives: putting a disruptive person 'back in his place' in public, telling a neighbour that his or her improperly maintained hedge inconveniences others in the neighbourhood, and interrupting a racist slur all represent this behaviour. These aggressive actions are all rituals: they animate the claimed voice of the community and they are expected to happen. Rites of moral aggression represent a type of ritual that has a negative impact on the recipient; however, their operation is significantly different from ordinary rituals. For example, a rite of dismissal has a negative impact on the recipient, but usually it is not a rite of moral aggression because (a) its performance does not necessarily trigger a sense of interpersonal aggression (and, if it becomes aggressive, it gets condemned), and (b) it may not so much resolve an ongoing moral conflict but rather declare the claimed voice of the community/organisation. However, it becomes a rite of moral aggression in the case of dismissing an employee who attempted to sexually harass a colleague. In such a case, the rite of dismissal (a) may be expected to take place in an (at least somewhat) aggressive form (provided, of course, that there is the legal ability to do this), and (b) this aggressive form of behaviour will resolve a moral turmoil within the community. Some forms of moral aggression provide resolution in a practical sense: for example, challenging an abusive person in public may help the victim and may also make the public space disturbance free for others. Consequently, even if an abusive person is challenged in a saliently rude way, (meta)debates may arise as regards whether or not the person who challenged the wrongdoer was genuinely impolite: while he may certainly be so from the abusive person's perspective, the community may endorse this action and reinterpret it as simply appropriate (i.e. not genuinely impolite).

The second part of the book, which examines this phenomenon, is primarily relevant to politeness theorists, as moral aggression entails a number of noteworthy questions, such as the conflict between public endorsement and 'genuine' impoliteness. Yet, readers with interest in language aggression and conflict may also want to consult this part of the book. In addition, I believe that Part II is relevant to ritual researchers, because of the interdisciplinary characteristic of the inquiry presented in it: examining moral aggression through the lenses of politeness research has so far been neglected in ritual studies.