# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims of the Book

This book aims to examine whether it is possible to describe English politeness as a whole, and as such it focuses on the complex relation between culture and politeness. In the process of answering this question about whether it is possible to describe English politeness (or French, Chinese or Arabic politeness), I draw on and aim to further develop a discursive approach to the analysis of politeness, rather than using more traditional theories of politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987).[1] A discursive approach to analysis, broadly speaking, focuses on the meaning of politeness in its social and interactive context, the role of evaluation and judgement and negotiation about whether an utterance counts as polite or not. While there have been articles and books on the subject of discursive approaches to the analysis of politeness and impoliteness and also publications concerning cross-cultural communication in relation to politeness in recent years (van der Bom and Mills, 2015; Grainger and Mills, 2015; Kadar and Mills, 2011; Linguistic Politeness Research Group, 2011), there has not been a book which systematically interrogates the discussion of cross-cultural and inter-cultural differences in evaluations of politeness, from this perspective. Nor has there been a focus on the social context of politeness to such an extent – it is this emphasis on the social context and on ideologies associated with politeness and impoliteness which constitutes my materialist focus. This book asks theorists and researchers to be clear about whose politeness norms we are researching when we analyse, for example, English politeness. What I argue is that when we discuss English politeness, it is in fact what we assume are the elite norms that we are focusing on, and that we need to analyse other non-elite forms of politeness and impoliteness and develop models for the analysis of non-elite politeness which do not present such linguistic behaviour as deficient. When we describe English politeness, we are in fact drawing on linguistic ideologies surrounding Englishness and politeness (Grainger and Mills, 2015). While focused on English politeness as a case study, the implications of this work for the analysis of other language groups will be emphasised throughout.

This book examines politeness norms in relation to particular cultures and what can be said about the cultural homogeneity of politeness and impoliteness systems and resources. When an individual intends to be polite, or is evaluated as having been polite (however we define politeness),[2] they do not invent this system of expressing their relations to others. Politeness can be seen as a set of enregistered forms, whose meaning is not completely fixed, but yet which have a certain degree of conventionalisation; politeness can thus be seen as a set of resources which individuals can draw on and modify in interaction. So, although individuals make a decision about what they wish to indicate to others, and choose from a range of options in terms of whether they will signal social closeness, distance, honesty, suspicion, aggression and so on, this decision is determined by what they consider to be the range of options already mapped out for them within the language. These options or politeness resources are not a fixed resource, because within particular social groups the norms are in relative flux, due to the fact that not everyone who speaks the language has the same access to these norms or will interpret them in the same way. Furthermore, the fact that there are divergent perceptions about what passes for a politeness norm has an impact on the whole system of politeness and what is available for speakers. This system of resources which I am describing bears some resemblance to Agha's (2007) notion of enregisterment and register in that, by force of repetition, certain linguistic forms become associated with or indirectly index certain values or meanings. However, as I explain in Chapter 5, I modify the notion of simple repetition keeping these forms in place. Instead, I discuss the pay-offs and benefits which accrue to interactants when they use these sets of resources in order to account for the fact that individuals draw on the resources within a system, rather than expressing themselves in a wholly individualistic way. I think of these resources using the analogy of a Mexican Wave at a football stadium. Within Western societies we like to think about ourselves as intrinsically individualistic, different from others, and deciding on what we say solely on the basis of our own individual needs; however, the notion of our relation to society and social norms is much more like participation in a Mexican Wave than it is to an isolated individual making choices solely in relation to their own needs. This type of crowd behaviour happens at football stadiums but not in theatre audiences for example, and therefore the context in which behaviour occurs is important. In a Mexican Wave, there is no-one who orchestrates the wave overall; someone at the side of a football stand simply instigates the wave and those in their immediate vicinity recognise the behaviour as constituting appropriate behaviour for a football match and constituting a Mexican Wave. The act of lifting one's arms in the air immediately after the person next to you ripples through the stadium until the other side of the stadium is reached. Each individual makes a decision up to a point about how they are going to behave, but very few people decide to

keep their arms at their side (as this would spoil the wave) and instead they join in this group movement, because there is a pay-off or benefit to each of them as an individual. Each of them, in the act of raising their arms, gains the sense that they are part of a social group, and this, for the social animal that humans are, is a great benefit. Politeness functions in much the same way. It is a system which is constituted by individuals who behave in a similar way to one another and, through repetition of this system, meanings are valued and attached indexically to certain forms of behaviour by particular groups, and those meanings are contested and changed over time. But there are benefits to taking part in this system which are to do with being part of a wider social group, and signalling that membership to others.

What we term English politeness, as I mentioned above, largely consists of stereotypical or ideological beliefs about both Englishness and politeness. And politeness seems to play a major role in how Englishness is defined. Take, for example, a post on Facebook recently by Iamasdaman (www.tickld.com/T/936330) entitled '30 Things British People Say and What They Actually Mean', which was widely shared over the internet in 2015:

1. 'I might join you later' – Meaning: I'm not leaving the house today unless it's on fire.
2. 'Excuse me, I'm sorry, is anyone sitting here?' – Translation: You have three seconds to move your bag before I end you.
3. 'Not to worry' – Translation: I will never forget this.
4. Ending an email with 'Thanks' as a warning that you're perilously close to losing your temper.
5. 'If you say so' – Translation: I'm afraid that what you're saying is the height of idiocy.
6. Saying 'You're welcome' as quietly as possible to people that don't say thank you but using it as a form of punishing them.

Although these examples are posted for humorous effect, and although none of these examples is explicitly labelled as polite behaviour, we can clearly recognise that politeness is at issue here. On the surface, the British person is represented as being polite, showing respect for their interlocutor, but underneath, their real feelings are in stark contrast. To take example 2 ('Excuse me, I'm sorry, is anyone sitting here?') on the surface, it employs conventionalised polite forms such as 'excuse me' and 'sorry' and uses an indirect question, asking whether someone is sitting on a seat which has a bag on it, rather than explicitly asking if the seat is free, or requesting that the bag be moved. This combination of indirectness and explicit politeness markers would seem a fairly conventionalised way, in British English, of asking if it is possible to take a seat, which is in stark contrast to what the author of this Facebook post asserts British people in fact are thinking and repressing: 'You have three

seconds to move your bag before I end you.' The post is headed thirty things British people say and what *we* actually mean, and it is this contrast between conventionalised utterances which are on the surface polite, and what 'we' the British actually think and feel, which, in some ways, is taken to constitute stereotypical Britishness.

By examining, in this book, what has been termed English politeness as a linguistic ideology (Hill, 2008; Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2004), I critically examine the elements which mitigate against the possibility of holding to a notion of English politeness as a single style or set of resources.[3] My aim is to analyse the way that the resources of politeness are varied across a cultural group and possibly also differently inflected within and across social and regional groups, even perhaps down to the level of the Community of Practice (CoP) and individual. I examine certain factors which have so far not been considered systematically enough in the analysis of politeness: these are class, gender, age and region. I do not deal with these simply as variables (seen from a top-down perspective), which have an impact on the interaction. Instead, I take a more social constructionist approach, examining the way that these elements are oriented to within conversation and the way that they indirectly index particular values (Pizziconi and Christie, 2017).[4] My focus is particularly on class in this book and my aim is to call on politeness theorists to question their focus on middle-class ideologies of politeness and to expand their horizons to examine the way that non-elite groups deploy politeness and impoliteness resources.

The point of this book is to question whether discussing 'English' politeness at all is valid, since such a notion of national politeness norms consists largely of stereotypes and ideological beliefs. It confuses the norms of the elite with those of the cultural or linguistic group as a whole. Concentrating on elite norms in politeness involves the exclusion from consideration of the behaviour of a range of different communities from our analysis. It also enforces a view of politeness as consisting solely of concern for others, being nice and displaying empathy. By contrast, I argue in this book that as well as acting as displays of concern for others (and also many other things, such as displaying oneself as a 'good', 'thoughtful' person), politeness and impoliteness are crucial in the process of marking boundaries between social groups on the basis of gender, class and age, and affirming those boundaries as 'natural' (Blitvich, 2013; Locher, 2004; Watts, 2003).

In this introductory chapter, I firstly discuss the relationship between politeness and class, and then consider traditional models of politeness critically, before focusing on discursive approaches to an analysis of politeness and impoliteness.

### *1.1.1 Politeness and Class*

Watts (2003) has drawn attention to the importance of viewing politeness through the lens of class. He gives as an illustrative example a quotation from

Langford (1989) in discussing the social mores in Britain in the eighteenth century. Langford says: 'The essence of politeness was often said to be that *je ne sais quoi* which distinguished the innate gentleman's understanding of what made for civilized conduct' (Langford, cited in Watts, 2003: 42). Watts comments that 'we can infer that those who had the *je ne sais quoi* constituted a privileged in-group. With the benefit of historical insight, we know that the in-group was composed of groups of individuals with political, financial and moral power in the state. So it is hardly surprising that they did everything to uphold the mystique of politeness and to construct the knowledge of the *je ne sais quoi* as an elusive but, for the outsider, never-to-be-attained goal.' This quotation from Watts sums up the way that upper-class groups maintained their privileged position, since 'the innate gentleman' was born into a particular class position associated with politeness and courtesy, and others, born outside that class position, could not, or were not permitted to, imitate those forms of speech.

My concern with the analysis of politeness and class stems largely, but not exclusively, from my own class history. I grew up in a working-class family who very much positioned themselves as on the borders of respectable working class/lower middle class. My father was from a mining community from outside Rotherham, but his class position was changed by him becoming a professional footballer; my mother is from a working-class background in Devon, in that her father worked in a brick factory and later in a market garden and her mother was a cleaner; her brother is a painter and decorator. Neither of my parents was educated past the age of fourteen and both struggled to find a place in what they saw as a difficult, complex and often confusing world (for example, the world of parents' evenings, GCSE examinations and university applications and institutions in general, which they found very forbidding). My wider family is in the process of changing, as many families in the United Kingdom have done within the last 30 years, positioning themselves as middle class, by marrying people who are more clearly ensconced within the middle class, through accumulating wealth themselves, and through education, training and changes in lifestyle and possessions, and, ultimately, through language use and style.

My own class transition from speaking a southern rural dialect within a working-class community, to speaking Received Pronunciation (RP) because of the demands of being in a university context where that rural dialect and accent were seen as inimical to intellectualism and intelligence, has made me acutely aware of the importance of analysing language and class, and particularly politeness and class. I grew up in an era where it was seen to be possible to 'escape' the working class through education, and I am aware of the way in which my own family's class shift has been mirrored by a shift in language – my own from a stigmatised regional dialect/accent to RP, and the rest of my family's shift in views also around issues of politeness and appropriate linguistic behaviour. I will not refer extensively to my own personal class history

throughout this book, but in a sense this straddling of class boundaries has created a keen sense of the ways in which class impacts upon the production of politeness and the judgement of certain elements as polite.

This description of my class history might sound superfluous and perhaps a little too personal. Indeed, when I first wrote about class and politeness in an article, one of the reviewers suggested any reference to my own class position should be excised since it was 'too embarrassing' (Mills, 2004). However, a concern with class position, the way it is negotiated within interaction and the way it is displayed by interactants has been an abiding concern for me throughout my academic and non-academic life. It is clear to me that politeness and impoliteness have very direct relationships with class position and that a transition from working class to middle class entails changes in relation to use and judgement of what counts as polite and impolite. By detailing my own class position, I am not claiming an authentic class position or voice for myself. Nor am I assuming that my class position necessarily in itself gives me any particular insights; however, it is often through changing that one becomes aware of the multiple factors which lead to a sense of 'fit' within one class or the other. The lessons from feminist and Queer analysis of heteronormativity and the way that heterosexuality feels as if it is just 'natural' are very pertinent here, because middle classedness is held in place by a number of different supports – cultural and social capital, as we will see in later chapters, but also by language (Zimman et al., 2014). Politeness is just one of those linguistic elements which keeps in place middle-classed behavioural norms and language which indirectly indexes middle-class positions.

Class has begun to be more foregrounded within linguistic analysis and is now seen by many as an important factor in linguistic variation (Block, 2014; Savage, 2013, 2015; Snell, 2010, 2013a,b). The influence of class on language is no longer seen, in the way that Bernstein (1973, 1996) represented it, as a limiting factor, as a deficit on the part of the working class, but is now seen as a factor which interactants draw on to mark out their sense of their own class position. Thus, class is now more clearly seen as a resource which is indirectly indexed through language, as well as being a factor which constrains and enables linguistic production and evaluation.[5]

## 1.2 Traditional Approaches to the Analysis of Politeness

I would like to give a necessarily brief account of traditional approaches to the analysis of politeness and impoliteness, because this sets in context the development of discursive approaches (a fuller account can be found in Eelen, 2001; Linguistic Politeness Research Group, 2011; Watts, 2003).[6] By examining the problems in Brown and Levinson's account of politeness, I am not simply dismissing their ground-breaking and highly influential work. Instead,

by focusing on the contradictions and difficulties with using their work, we can begin to develop a more complex form of theorising and analysis. I then go on to set out the form of discursive approach which I develop throughout this book: a materialist discursive approach.

Brown and Levinson's work on politeness has had a major impact on the research field (1978, 1987). They were the first to propose a systematic model of politeness and, although there has been much criticism of their work, many theorists still use their terminology and concepts, while modifying some elements of their theorisation. Brown and Levinson proposed that politeness is largely strategic, a calculation that speakers make when interacting with others in terms of their social distance from the other person, the power relation between them and the 'cost' of the imposition on the other (if, say, for example, the speaker is requesting something from the hearer). From this calculation, the speaker works out what they need to 'pay' the other person in terms of politeness.[7] Brown and Levinson's approach has been criticised because of their depiction of politeness as strategic. For them, individuals need to defend their 'face', that is the self-image of themselves which they, in interaction with others, agree to maintain. If others maintain your face, you, in turn, will maintain their face. Face threatening acts (FTAs) are classified by them as any actions which potentially disturb the balance of face maintenance among interactants. For example, a request might be considered potentially face threatening, since, if the hearer in fact wishes not to accede to the request, they will need to do a certain amount of face-saving work, both in relation to their own and the other's face. Thus, politeness, for Brown and Levinson, is seen as, in essence, the mitigation of potential threats to face.[8]

Brown and Levinson characterised politeness as consisting of two elements: negative and positive politeness. Negative politeness is largely concerned with not imposing on the other person, indicating deference and respect towards them. Thus, apologising would be categorised as negative politeness, as it is seen to be recognising the needs and wishes of the other person, indicating that the other person will not be imposed upon. Positive politeness is concerned with stressing the closeness between the speaker and the hearer and indicating that the needs of the hearer and the speaker are very similar. Paying someone a compliment or telling them a joke is characterised as positive politeness, as both of these are seen to be concerned with stressing the closeness of the relationship between interactants.

### *1.2.1 Problems with the Traditional Approach to the Analysis of Politeness*

There are a number of issues which have exercised theorists of politeness since Brown and Levinson's work was first published. These critiques have

led theorists to either refine Brown and Levinson's model or attempt to produce new models of analysis. I will deal with a number of criticisms of their work here: universalism; the relation between indirectness and politeness; definitions of politeness and context. These are elements which are crucial to a more general critique of, and analysis of, English politeness. This critique has informed and led to the development of new models of analysis, particularly the discursive approach, and it is for this reason that I am discussing it here, because in confronting these critical issues it is possible to produce a more adequate model – shaped in relation to, and in contrast to, their work.

The first problem I will discuss is that of universalism. Brown and Levinson claimed that their model was a universal description of politeness, that is, that it could be used to describe politeness in all languages. They argued that individual language groups differed in the extent to which they used positive or negative politeness, but that in essence all languages subscribed to the same system of politeness. In recent years, however, this traditional approach has come under scrutiny, largely because, although this model seems, at a stereotypical level, to be adequate to describe ideologies of British politeness, it certainly is not an effective model for analysing, for example, East Asian languages (Kadar and Mills, 2011; Matsumoto, 1989).[9] Within languages such as Japanese or Chinese, it is often asserted that speakers are not focused on the fulfilment of their individual needs, and politeness is not seen in these languages to be concerned only with the needs of the individual. Instead, East Asian languages are characterised as being concerned to mark an awareness of one's position within a hierarchical group and to display that awareness of position in relation to others in the group. Ide (1989) put forward a distinction between discernment and volition to describe these two opposing concerns. Discernment (*wakimae*) is the concern with marking one's sense of one's social position and relationship with an interlocutor, for example, through the use of honorifics. Many East Asian languages are characterised as exhibiting a tendency to mark discernment in politeness usage grammatically more frequently than Western European languages, or this marking of position seems to be more part of expected or appropriate behaviour than it is in Western European languages. Volition, on the other hand, is characterised by Ide as the type of politeness where the individual decides on the shape and form of the utterance, and tailors it themselves to what they see as the demands of the context and interlocutor. This is often seen by traditional politeness theorists as the type of politeness which is prevalent in Western European languages – being concerned with the individual needs of the speaker – and it is this type of strategic politeness that is described by Brown and Levinson. Ide (1989) described these two styles of politeness as being related to Eastern and Western cultures. However, Mills and Kadar (2011) have described these two styles as tendencies only, arguing that East Asian languages are not wholly characterised by discernment, nor are

Western European languages largely characterised only by volition. Instead, these are tendencies which can be found in all languages. Mills and Kadar (2011) have also questioned that there is such a clear distinction to be made between these two terms, and have argued that in fact it is more productive to explore the relation between certain types of ritualised and conventionalised utterances to more creative individualistic statements. Furthermore, even if discernment and volition occur in all languages, it is clear that this cannot be asserted as a universal rule, because in each language they have slightly different functions, evaluations and histories of use. Nevertheless, these debates about discernment and volition point to the difficulty of constructing a model of politeness which is universal.

The second issue with Brown and Levinson's work which I wish to critique is the relation between indirectness and politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that there is a scale of politeness, ranging from indirectness and avoidance of speaking at the most polite end of the spectrum, to the directness of bald on-record utterances at the most impolite end of the spectrum; indirectness for them is seen to be one of the most polite forms. For them, when someone requests something, if they are indirect, they give the hearer the option of not explicitly acknowledging that a request has been made, thus saving the face of both speaker and hearer and implicitly recognising the interlocutor's rights. For example, if a speaker says, 'You couldn't possibly open this for me, could you?', using an indirect form rather than the conventionally indirect form: 'Can you open this for me?' or the more direct form 'Open this', they offer the hearer more options in terms of being able to refuse the request. In a sense, the most indirect form already has the potential for refusal embedded within it. This is a highly elaborated form which signals to the interlocutor that the speaker recognises that they are making a request which might be refused and signalling also to the hearer that they have the option to refuse. All of these choices for a request are highly conventionalised in British English and therefore it is difficult to describe the intention or the impact of this type of indirectness in particular interactions. However, overall, using indirectness in British English seems to signal an acknowledgement that making such a request involves potentially face-threatening behaviour, and because this difficulty has been indicated to the hearer, refusal is less likely to threaten the speaker's or the hearer's face. This type of indirectness is characterised by Brown and Levinson as universal; others have seen it as stereotypically English (Wierzbicka, 1999). However, others have argued that this type of indirectness is associated with stereotypically elite forms of politeness in British English in particular (Grainger and Mills, 2015). This is not to say that all middle- and upper-class speakers of English use indirectness in all situations, and that all working-class people use directness, but rather that, at an ideological level, indirectness is associated with qualities such as refinement, concern for others

and empathy, which are associated with middle-class civilised behaviour, and which are then used to display one's assessment of one's own and others' class position. For non-elite groups in Britain, this indirect style may be interpreted as distancing and unfriendly and therefore as potentially impolite.

While many theorists have asserted that for elite British English, indirectness is seen to be the most polite form, in other languages, indirectness may in fact be considered impolite. Kerkam (2017) has shown that in Arabic, indirectness is rarely used for the purposes of being polite, as directness is seen as the more expected or appropriate form for requests and excuses. Indirectness, if used in these contexts, would indicate a social or affective distance between the interlocutors, and therefore could give rise to an interpretation of impoliteness.[10] Kerkam also shows that when indirectness is strategically used by interlocutors, it tends to be used for face-threatening acts. She has shown that criticising and blaming are often achieved through indirect means, particularly by women, where it is termed 'making meanings'. This interpretation of indirect utterances as face threatening is highly conventionalised in Arabic-speaking cultures. Thus, we should not imagine that because of stereotypes of the way indirectness is used in British English that other languages use indirectness or even conceive of indirectness in the same way (see Grainger and Mills, 2015).

Furthermore, indirectness is not an agreed-upon term in all languages; thus what counts as indirectness in English (for example, conventional indirectness such as 'Could you open the window?') might not be seen as indirect at all in some languages, and would instead be seen as an enquiry about capability (Wierzbicka, 1999). The supposed widespread use of indirectness for refusals in East Asian languages should be viewed as conventionalised, and is often interpreted by native speakers of these languages as fairly straightforward and not indicating indirectness or politeness necessarily. Thus, indirectness should be seen to have a complex relationship with politeness, and it is clear that particular languages do not necessarily view or use indirectness in the same way as it is interpreted in British English.

The third problem with Brown and Levinson's model is the definition of politeness. As I mentioned earlier, Brown and Levinson see politeness as strategic and as concerned with the mitigation of face threat. For discursive theorists, this definition needs to be made more complex (see Section 1.3 of this chapter). Brown and Levinson's model of politeness as a mitigation of face threat, attending to others' needs and safeguarding one's own autonomy is obviously not an adequate model for analysing what it is that individuals do when they are being polite, or evaluating someone's utterances as polite or impolite.

It is difficult to make generalisations about politeness across all languages. While it can be asserted that there is something approximating the term 'politeness' in all languages, not all languages have a term which is equivalent to 'politeness' with the same connotations that the term 'politeness' has within