1 Exploring Politeness in the History of English

1.1 Introduction[1]

The British have a reputation for being excessively polite. A caricature version of this is available as a picture postcard on which two pictures illustrate allegedly incorrect and correct polite behaviour in a British context (Ford and Legon 2003; see also Wierzbicka 2006: 31). In the picture illustrating the 'incorrect' behaviour, a man who is drowning shouts 'Help!' but gets no more than a haughty shrug and a turned shoulder from a passer-by and his dog. In the adjacent picture, illustrating the 'correct' behaviour, the drowning man politely exclaims, 'Excuse me, Sir. I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I wonder if you would mind helping me a moment, as long as it's no trouble, of course.' In response, the passer-by immediately comes to the rescue with a life belt, and even his dog changes appearance, puts on a friendly face and wags its tail.

To the extent that we appreciate the humour of this cartoon, it appears that it contains at least a grain of truth. We recognise a type of behaviour that we stereotypically associate with present-day English in a British context. However, it is clear that the cartoon presents a version of British politeness that is both simplified and exaggerated. It reduces politeness to an excessive endeavour not to impose on a stranger in a public context even in an emergency. It is an elaborate apology for imposing on the passer-by and disturbing him in his walk with the dog. This has come to be known as negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), and Stewart (2005: 128) comments that 'in certain circumstances at least, British English tends towards negative politeness and favours off-record strategies in carrying out certain face-threatening acts' (Stewart 2005: 128). But to what extent is this really typical of British English – is it something that goes back to earlier periods of English, or is it a type of politeness that has developed only recently?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun *politeness* with the meaning 'courtesy, good manners, behaviour that is respectful or considerate of others' is first attested in the English language in 1655 (*OED* 3rd ed.,

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[1] Some passages of this chapter are taken from Jucker (2008, 2012a and 2016).

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politeness, n. 3a). The adjective *polite* with the meaning 'refined, elegant, scholarly; exhibiting good or restrained taste' is somewhat older and goes back to about 1500 (OED 3rd ed., polite, adj. and n. 2a). It is a borrowing from Latin *polītus*, the past participle of *polīre* 'to smooth, to polish'. Are we, therefore, to assume that polite behaviour and politeness did not exist prior to this, or – if such behaviour did exist – that there was no need to talk about it? This is, of course, unlikely but a more precise answer depends very much on what we mean by 'polite behaviour' and 'politeness'. The OED definitions give a first indication of how the terms are being used in English, but we should not assume without further investigation that the behaviour described as polite in the sixteenth and seventeenth century is the same as the behaviour that we might want to describe with these terms in present-day English. And how exactly did an English person in the seventeenth century show his or her good manners? Was non-imposition as important then as the cartoon makes us believe it is today? Politeness is an elusive concept that defies any attempts at an easy and quick definition, and non-imposition politeness of the type presented in the above-mentioned caricature is, in fact, a very recent phenomenon, as I will show in Chapter 9.

But, the term 'politeness' is not only an everyday word of the English language with more or less closely related terms in other languages, such as *Höflichkeit* in German, *politesse* in French, *beleefdheid* in Dutch and so on; it is also an established technical term in scholarly work in linguistics and in particular in pragmatics. As with other terms, this dual existence is not unproblematic. Basically, technical terms are nothing more than conventional expressions for abstract concepts; they are arbitrary labels that abbreviate lengthy descriptions of specific objects of investigation. The object of investigation may not always be very clearly delimited, and different researchers may not always agree about the use of specific terms, but the problems are exacerbated if the same term also has a life as an everyday expression. Everyday expressions are by their very nature fuzzy and subject to multiple variations, such as historical, dialectal, social and even personal differences. Such terms, therefore, usually have a much wider application than technical terms, and uncertainty often arises if the two are allowed to be confused, which is the case if a technical definition is refused simply on the grounds that the term means 'something else' in everyday language. It is, of course, unhelpful if a technical term is used to refer to something entirely different from that which the everyday meaning of the expression suggests. However, a technical term is not an everyday expression, and therefore it has a more specific denotation. Thus, it has become standard practice in politeness research to distinguish clearly between the technical term 'politeness' and the everyday notion 'politeness' (see Section 1.2).

The opposite of politeness is impoliteness or rudeness, and together these notions have received a lot of attention from researchers in pragmatics. More recent research regularly focuses on the whole spectrum from politeness to impoliteness including a wide spectrum of behaviour between these two poles. This more comprehensive field of study is often referred to as 'interpersonal pragmatics' (see, for instance, Locher and Graham 2010) or as '(im)politeness research' (see, for instance, Culpeper, Haugh and Kádár 2017). However, in this book I would like to focus more on the polite end of the spectrum in order to make the task somewhat more manageable. And even the focus on politeness will not allow a comprehensive account of its development across the entire history of the English language but only one that highlights some particularly noteworthy moments.

A truly comprehensive history of politeness in English does not yet appear to be possible. There are many excellent general histories of the English language, such as, for instance, the six-volume *Cambridge History of the English Language*[2] or the volumes by Baugh and Cable (2002), Mugglestone (2006), van Kemenade and Los (2006) or van Gelderen (2014), but they all focus on the language system, the phonology, morphology and syntax of the English language and its vocabulary. Issues of actual language use (i.e. the pragmatic level) are hardly mentioned at all, and even less is said about the level of politeness and impoliteness. The field of historical pragmatics is still relatively young, and despite a growing body of work on general questions and on specific problems in the history of individual languages, there are no large-scale overviews of the development of the pragmatic level of individual languages, and the following pages can offer no more than a first step in this direction by highlighting a range of selected aspects.

1.2   Epistemological Status of Politeness

First of all, it is necessary to distinguish more systematically between politeness as an everyday word and politeness as a technical term. It has become standard to call the everyday notion of the term *politeness* 'first-order politeness' or 'politeness$_1$', and the technical term 'second-order politeness' or 'politeness$_2$', and the same distinction applies to the term *impoliteness* (see in particular Watts 2003: 4; but also Watts et al. 1992: 3; Kasper 2003). Watts has the following to say about the two terms:

A theory of politeness$_2$ should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness$_1$, i.e. over the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members and not with ways in which social scientists lift the term

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[2] Hogg (1992); Blake (1992); Lass (1999); Romaine (1998); Burchfield (1994); Algeo (2001).

'(im)politeness' out of the realm of everyday discourse and elevate it to the status of a theoretical concept in what is frequently called Politeness Theory. (2003: 9)

Kasper (2003: 2) also states that 'first order politeness phenomena constitute the empirical input to politeness theories'. Thus, the object of study is, in effect, according to Watts or Kasper, the term *politeness*, or its equivalent in other languages, and how it is used by native speakers of each language. What are the phenomena that are described by this term, and how are they evaluated?

Examples (1) to (3) are three extracts from the *British National Corpus*, in which the term *polite* is used:

(1)   He laughed loudly at things that weren't funny and littered his English with expletives to appear more at home in the language. The chief, smug, supercilious and opinionated, was undaunted by our indifference. The English, he said, were a strange people. They liked to pretend that they were fair-minded and *polite*, but he himself had found that they were not *polite*. (BYU-BNC FEM 1531)

(2)   His voice was sharp, yet as intimate as if he had known her for a long time. There was to be no paddling around in the shallow waters for this man, Ruth thought. And with the thought came a tiny prick of fear. 'I'm not being coy,' she protested. 'I was trying to be *polite*. I'm not very good at *polite* conversation.' (BYU-BNC CB5)

(3)   Marion: Tea or coffee?
        Lucy: Whatever you're making.
        Cathi: Whatever you want.
        Lucy: Tea please. I don't drink coffee, I was just being *polite*. (BYU-BNC KPN)

In extract (1), a speaker comments on 'the English', who, according to him, consider themselves fair-minded and polite but, in his opinion, are not. Thus, the epithet politeness is indiscriminately applied, or not applied, to an entire nation but the extract does not give enough information on why the speaker finds the English to be lacking in politeness. In extract (2), the speaker admits to not being good at 'polite conversation'. Her attempt at being polite in conversation, she fears, may have come across as 'coy'. And in (3), Lucy describes her reluctance to specify her preference as being polite. Apparently, she did not want to put Marion to the trouble of preparing tea just for her, but when the offer is made again, she states her preference with what looks like an apology for not having been more specific in the first place.

A careful analysis of the terms *polite* and *politeness* in such contexts give us an ethnographic view of how speakers of English talk about politeness. It tells us much about the semantics of the words *polite* and *politeness* and thus about speakers' perception of what it means to be polite; or, in Kasper's terms, 'the semantics of the lexical entry "politeness" thus sheds light on social members' perception and classification of politeness' (2003: 2). In a historical context,

such analyses of the relevant politeness vocabulary are particularly important. We do not have direct access to native speaker intuitions, and we cannot use experimental methods (see Chapter 2).

Politeness$_2$, on the other hand, is related to politeness research. Brown and Levinson's (1987) classical view of politeness may serve as an example. They define politeness as a redress to a face threat. Politeness is used strategically to achieve specific interactional goals. Speakers behave in a rational and purposeful way, and because the face of both interlocutors is constantly at risk in the interaction, both of them engage in face work in order to maintain each other's face. Speakers cannot enhance their own face directly because it is what others see in the speaker. Therefore, it is generally in each speaker's interest to maintain the face of their interlocutors in order to enhance their own face in others' eyes.

The notion of face comes in two different kinds (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). Positive face relates to the wish of every person to be liked and appreciated by other people, while negative face relates to the wish of every person to be free in their own actions and to maintain their own territory. Face threats are seen as being threats to either one or the other of these two kinds of face, and face work, too, is seen as relating to one or the other. Positive politeness strategies, therefore, show the speaker's approval of the addressee, while negative politeness strategies give the addressee the option of self-determination, at least nominally if not in reality.

Brown and Levinson (1987: 13) have proposed a distinction between positive and negative face as universals, but this claim can easily be misunderstood as an ethnocentric projection. However, Brown and Levinson clearly envisage a great deal of cultural variation. In particular, they envisage much cultural variation in what constitutes a face threat and in the members of a society who have special roles in enhancing, maintaining or threatening the face of others. In addition, the balance between positive and negative face is also very likely to be culture-specific.

The cartoon mentioned at the beginning of this chapter highlights negative politeness. It is the type of politeness that signals non-imposition, and – at least on the surface – gives the addressee as many opportunities as possible to comply with the request or not. According to Watts, politeness theory should not concern itself with such second-order notions of politeness because they are artificially created and do not always coincide with the everyday notion of politeness. However, technical terms have the advantage over present-day concepts that they can be given more precise definitions and thus serve as useful labels for clearly delimited sets of phenomena.

Terkourafi (2011) argues that the distinction between politeness$_1$ and politeness$_2$ cannot be maintained because the two ultimately depend on each other. However, she appears to be using the terms in a slightly different

sense. She uses the term politeness$_1$ for the rules found in the prescriptive norms stipulated, for instance, in courtesy manuals. Such rules perform an important gatekeeping and social regulatory role for the preservation of social order. They typically emanate from the higher social classes, who use them to keep the lower social classes at a safe distance. Such a definition of first-order politeness is more specific than the general understanding, according to which first-order politeness applies more broadly to the everyday notion of the term *politeness*. Second-order politeness, according to Terkourafi, consists of the descriptive and, therefore, theoretical accounts of how politeness is actually used. On this basis, she argues that the prescriptive norms in the politeness manuals (i.e. first-order politeness) generally follow and reflect the descriptive norms (i.e. second-order politeness) because the ruling classes stipulate their understanding of appropriate behaviour as rules for future behaviour. Thus, 'prescriptive norms historically follow and reflect descriptive ones, while at the same time constraining future practices and so feeding back into the descriptive norms that gave rise to them in the first place' (Terkourafi 2011: 176). However, the study of first-order politeness on the basis of how the term *politeness* and other politeness-related vocabulary items are used in everyday discourse is not as clearly related to prescriptive norms as the study of courtesy books or politeness manuals. Second-order politeness, as described by Watts and others, generally has a descriptive basis but it is criticised because it does not cover the same range of phenomena as first-order politeness.

Eelen (2001: 32) distinguishes a third level of description, which he calls 'politeness-in-action'. In fact, he splits politeness$_1$ into an action-related side and a conceptual side. The action-related side is concerned with actually behaving in a particular way in interaction. The conceptual side, on the other hand, refers to 'the commonsense ideologies of politeness: to the way politeness is used as a concept, to opinions about what politeness is all about' (Eelen 2001: 32). He concedes that Watts et al. (1992) were concerned with the conceptual side of the everyday notion of politeness. Intuitively it is clear what Eelen has in mind. He makes a distinction between the thing itself and people's perception of the thing. However, we do not even have to invoke the philosophical question of whether things have a reality outside of their perception by humans. Even if politeness-in-action exists without being perceived, it does not have any useful status for the scholar. Scholars can either observe how people talk about behaviour for which they choose to use terms like *polite*, *impolite*, *rude*, *civil* and so on (politeness$_1$ studies), or they may study a range of phenomena for which they introduce a technical term (such as 'politeness', i.e. politeness$_2$). But they cannot study behaviour of a particular kind unless they specify what particular kind of behaviour they want to study.

Watts summarises the criticism levelled against Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as follows:

Between 1978 and 1987 and immediately after the reprint in 1987 opposition was raised against Brown and Levinson's conceptualisation of politeness as the realisation of face threat mitigation. Their approach did not seem to account for ways in which politeness had been understood in the English-speaking world prior to the late twentieth century, nor did it seem to account for ways in which related lexemes in other languages were used to refer to equivalent aspects of social behaviour. (Watts 2005: xi)

Thus, Brown and Levinson are criticised for delineating and defining a concept for the purpose of their research because it does not conform to the everyday notion with the same name. They chose to focus on one specific aspect and, therefore, ignore others.

However, it is often useful for scholars to define their objects of investigation as precisely as possible and to give them names in order to talk about them. Even if these names look like normal words of a particular language, however, they are only technical terms with a more or less well-defined denotation while words in everyday language generally have fuzzy denotational boundaries.

Watts (2005: xiii) describes politeness as 'a slippery, ultimately indefinable quality of interaction which is subject to change through time and across cultural space. There is, in other words, no stable referent indexed by the lexeme *polite*'. This is indeed true for politeness$_1$, which makes it a fascinating task to trace exactly these historical and cultural changes and differences. How is the term used in everyday language in the course of time and across different social groups? But the slippery quality of the everyday notion does not mean that scholars cannot provide a more or less precise definition of what kind of concept they are investigating on a particular occasion. If they use the term 'politeness' for this concept, it will probably be related in some way to the everyday notion, but it is inappropriate to expect the technical term to have the same denotational boundaries as the fuzzy everyday term. In their introduction to the volume *Politeness in Language*, Watts et al. state that one of the main aims of the papers collected in this volume is to 'question more profoundly what polite linguistic behaviour actually is' (1992: 2; see also Watts 2005: xv). This is a fundamentally essentialist way of proceeding. It starts with a term and tries to find the 'real' or 'true' concept for it. But scholarly work has to move in the other direction. It must describe interesting phenomena or concepts and then provide a label for them. The act of labelling itself is fairly trivial. It is not empirically interesting. Its one and only purpose is to make it easier to refer to the concept that has been described.

Once this has been accepted, it does not make sense to blame researchers for using different terminologies or for not agreeing on 'what politeness actually *is*' (Watts 2005: xv). Every researcher is free to focus on objects of his or her

choice and to use any label that seems convenient for the purpose. Obviously, such disagreements make it more difficult to compare different approaches. But the comparison has to use the underlying concepts that the different researchers have set out to describe and not the arbitrary labels that they have chosen to use for their purpose (see Janicki 1989, 1990). Watts acknowledges that it is impossible to delimit politeness$_1$ with any kind of precision but he nevertheless maintains that it is politeness$_1$ which should be the 'rockbed of a postmodernist approach to the study of linguistic politeness' (2005: xxi).

The distinction between politeness$_1$ and politeness$_2$ is related to the distinction between emic and etic approaches to politeness (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009: 16). Sometimes the two sets of terms are even used more or less synonymously. The terms emic and etic originate with Pike (1954) and are derived from phonetics and phonemics, where phonetics studies the properties of sound production, transmission and reception, while phonemics studies the inventories and regularities of the specific sounds that are used by speakers of a particular language. In the words of Triandis: 'Emics, roughly speaking, are ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culture-specific. Etics, roughly speaking, are ideas, behaviours, items, and concepts that are culture general – i.e. universal' (1994: 67–8; quoted after Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009: 16). Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009: 16) stress that these approaches are not contradictory but rather complementary. In order to describe the particular sounds of a language and their relation to each other, we need the terminology provided by the study of articulation in general. In order to describe the sounds of English (phonemics), it is necessary to use terms relating to place of articulation and so on (phonetics). Figure 1.1 plots the relationship of the distinction between emic and etic approaches and the distinction between first- and second-order concepts.
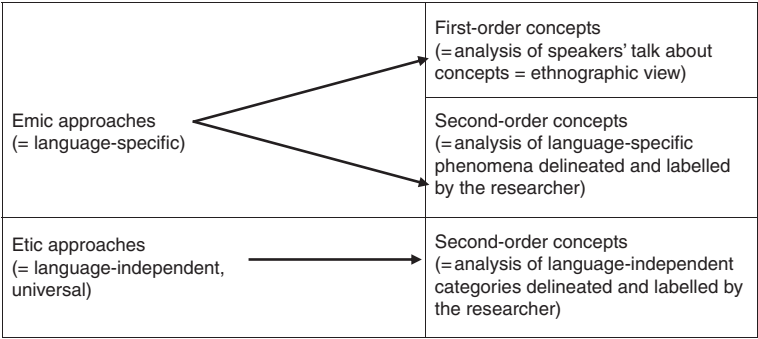

Figure 1.1 Relationship between emic/etic and first-order/second-order distinction

An etic approach is always language-independent and, therefore, relies on second-order concepts that have been delimited by the researchers. Emic approaches, on the other hand, can either use second-order concepts if they focus on language-specific phenomena that have been delineated and labelled by the researcher, or they can use first-order concepts if they focus on the everyday terms that are being used by specific language users. Such an approach can be called 'ethnographic' because it analyses the actual interactions in specific cultures or societies or it can be called 'metapragmatic' because it analyses how speakers talk on a metalevel about their use of language (see Blum-Kulka 1992).

A historical study of politeness must necessarily adopt an emic approach. The object of investigation is politeness in a particular culture and across a particular period of time. But this still leaves open the possibility of studying (im)politeness$_1$ or (im)politeness$_2$. In the former case, the scholar sets out to study politeness-related terms, such as *politeness*, *courtesy*, *tact* and *civility*, or terms such as *impoliteness*, *rudeness* and *incivility* (with all their diachronic spelling variants). In the latter case, the scholar defines a particular aspect of verbal behaviour or a particular communicative task (e.g. in the areas of face mitigation, maintenance and enhancement), and tries to locate linguistic patterns and expressions that are being used to carry out this task.

In this book, I will use both approaches. In the following chapters, I will regularly rely on an analysis of the available politeness vocabulary for a given time period, and I will consider the discourse on politeness in different time periods. Such discourses can be found both in fictional texts in which an author presents characters that comment on appropriate behaviour or in conduct literature, in which the author provides advice to readers on how they should behave and talk in certain situations. But I will also apply some of the standard second-order conceptualisations of politeness to selected data from periods throughout the history of English in order to find out whether these specific forms (e.g. non-imposition politeness) existed at specific points in the history of English or to find out when in the history of English they started to develop. Our knowledge of the different politeness cultures in the history of English is still patchy, and it seems advisable to combine different perspectives in order to gain a broader understanding of the development of politeness over the course of time.

1.3 Three Waves of Politeness Research

Politeness research has undergone considerable changes since the publication of the pioneering study by Brown and Levinson in 1978 and its republication in 1987. Grainger (2011) and Culpeper (2011b) describe the

development of politeness research since then in terms of three waves (see also Culpeper and Hardaker 2017). The metaphor of the wave is a useful one because it is a reminder that there can be no clear-cut boundaries between the three sets of approaches, and in fact any characterisation that serves to distinguish the three waves is bound to exaggerate differences that in reality are subtler.

The first wave was initiated and shaped by publications such as Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983) and, most prominently, Brown and Levinson (1987). It is characterised by a reliance on a technical definition of what politeness is (i.e. it is a second-order or politeness$_2$ approach). In such approaches linguistic forms are mapped to specific politeness functions. Indirect requests, such as, 'Could you pass the salt, please?', for instance, are analysed as instances of negative politeness. The earliest approaches focused exclusively on polite behaviour. Impolite behaviour came to be analysed only later (e.g. Culpeper 1996) and was seen as the flip side of politeness. This type of approach very much focuses on the speakers and their attempt to strategically maintain their own and their addressee's face.

The second wave consisted mainly of a rejection of the first wave (see in particular Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005; and, for an overview, Mills 2011). The main point of criticism was generally that Brown and Levinson's model assigned specific politeness values to individual linguistic expressions. Instead, the critics argued that politeness values are not static, and specific linguistic expressions do not have fixed politeness values. Such values are always discursively negotiated, and the analytical focus shifts from the speaker to the interaction between the speaker and the addressee. Such approaches have come to be known as discursive or postmodern politeness approaches. Locher and Watts describe the task of the discursive politeness analyst as follows:

> We consider it important to take native speaker assessments of politeness seriously and to make them the basis of a discursive, data-driven, bottom-up approach to politeness. The discursive dispute over such terms in instances of social practice should represent the locus of attention for politeness research. By discursive dispute we do not mean real instances of disagreement amongst members of a community of practice over the terms 'polite', 'impolite', etc. but rather the discursive structuring and reproduction of forms of behavior and their potential assessments . . . by individual participants. (Locher and Watts 2005: 16)

In literary contexts, too, passages can be found in which politeness issues are discussed explicitly, as for instance in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 3*, in which King Henry reflects on the semantic values of address terms (see Busse 2006: 210).