

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Aim and Readership of the Book

This book is aimed at all those who are interested in intercultural relations – in relating with people who have different national, linguistic, social, ethnic, religious or other backgrounds to ourselves. The focus, as the subtitle indicates, is therefore on managing relations across cultures – how people build, maintain and manage relations when communicating across group boundaries of various kinds, such as national, linguistic and ethnic.

We have two broad aims: one conceptual and the other applied. Conceptually, we take a relational approach to (im)politeness and seek to advance the theoretical modelling of (im)politeness by developing a framework and a cluster of concepts that can be used for understanding and analysing intercultural interaction from the perspective of intercultural relations. To help achieve this, we take an interdisciplinary approach, drawing together notions and insights from politeness theory (mainly within pragmatics) on the one hand and from intercultural theory (within psychology and communication studies) on the other. From an application perspective, we hope that our framework, experiential examples and analyses will be helpful from a practical point of view. We acknowledge that managing relations can be challenging, whatever the context, but this may be even more the case when participants hold different attitudes, expectations and evaluation criteria. Yet we believe that engaging with difference, as intercultural interaction inevitably entails (by definition – see below), can bring richness and personal enhancement, to the benefit of all.

In taking an interdisciplinary approach, we are very aware that some of the concepts and frameworks discussed in the book will be very familiar to some of the readership yet new to others. We have tried to assume as little prior disciplinary knowledge as possible, but also to bring together ideas and understandings from different fields to provide fresh perspectives and insights. The book is thus written for a wide-reaching audience:

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- those who are interested for academic reasons; for example, readers who are taking postgraduate courses in the area or undertaking (postgraduate) research;
- those who are interested for professional development purposes; for example, readers who are working in intercultural contexts and who wish to update their understanding of the field and learn about recent theories and research; and
- those who are interested for personal, altruistic reasons; for example, readers who have neighbours, friends and/or family members who are from different cultural backgrounds and who wish to gain some insights into the factors that influence relational management across cultures.

For all these different types of readers, we believe that our book will provide a helpful mapping of relevant issues, thought-provoking examples of intercultural encounters, concepts and frameworks for interpreting those encounters, accessible analyses of key features of those encounters, and pointers for the journey towards greater competence and pleasure in relating across cultures.

### 1.2 The Title of the Book: The Terms ‘Politeness’ and ‘Intercultural’

The main title of the book has two elements: ‘intercultural’ and ‘politeness’. It is important, therefore, to explain early on our interpretations of those terms. We start with ‘politeness’.

The term ‘politeness’ and its linguacultural equivalents such as *limao* 礼貌 in Chinese and *reigi(tadashii)* 礼儀 (正しい) in Japanese, are often popularly associated with etiquette. In many daily life contexts, admitting that someone is an academic working on ‘politeness theory’ would unavoidably raise eyebrows as it would suggest the person is spending their time scrutinising table manners and other aspects of good manners. However, in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics in particular, politeness and impoliteness – or ‘(im)politeness’ to refer to a regular technical term – is interpreted differently from this. It encompasses the wide range of interactional phenomena by means of which interactants build up, maintain or challenge interpersonal relationships. As people engage (or refuse/fail to engage) in interaction, they say and do things which the other then evaluates and reacts to, which, in turn, may also get reactions. In terms of relational management, the production and evaluation of politeness and impoliteness enhances or undermines rapport. Since intended polite behaviour can have an impolite effect, and the other way around, we do not use ‘politeness’ and ‘impoliteness’ as separate terms. We focus instead on the notion of relating – fostering or enhancing of relations, undermining or damaging of relations, or simply maintaining the status quo of relations. In most of this book, therefore, we use the term ‘politeness’ to encompass both polite and impolite behaviour and evaluation, unless we specify otherwise.

In many disciplines outside of pragmatics, ‘politeness theory’ is primarily associated with the seminal model of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1987) (see Chapter 2). However, politeness has been studied very broadly within the field of pragmatics, such that it has become a huge field with several hundreds or even thousands of new publications on the subject appearing each year.

As we will point out in Chapter 2, politeness has the following five key characteristics:

- politeness is a relational phenomenon;
- politeness follows (linguistic) patterns;
- politeness means different things, depending on who attempts to define (or interpret) it;
- politeness comes into existence partly in interaction, and partly by not engaging in interaction (e.g. a person may get criticised for *not* doing something in interaction); and
- politeness is both an interactional and an extra-interactional phenomenon, in the sense that intercultural interaction is influenced by phenomena such as intergroup attitudes and stereotyping (see Chapter 3), which are not interactional in the strict sense of this word. Rather, people ‘bring’ such phenomena into a particular interaction. Such factors may become salient in intercultural scenarios.

As this outline illustrates, evaluation is fundamental to how politeness comes into existence, and in the body of politeness research it has even been argued that it is more important how we interpret politeness than how we produce it (see Eelen, 2001). Simply put, while productive intention may be important in politeness behaviour, ultimately such intention is nulled if the other party does not interpret what is said or done accordingly. Considering the importance of evaluation in politeness theory and the relevance of evaluation to intercultural scenarios, we dedicate Part II of this book to capture facets that influence the evaluation process, in particular in those intercultural settings in which there is a certain sense of pragmatic uncertainty. We will approach evaluation through the concept of what we call an ‘evaluation warrant’, which consists of interpersonal sensitivities and a socio-moral order, that influences how someone judges a particular instance of interaction in a specific setting.

Part III of this book focuses on ‘producing politeness’ to manage relations. For organisational purposes, we explore this from two main angles: ‘proactive’ and ‘reactive’ forms of behaviour. We attempt to move away from the concept of ‘realising’ politeness – a way in which it is often described in pragmatics – by approaching politeness behaviour as unfolding in interaction and by devoting special attention to the ways in which culture may influence this process. Within interaction, politeness may come into existence in the form of proactive behaviour as people seek to maintain smooth relationships (e.g. engage in

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a chit-chat with someone they know) or establish new relationships. It may also come into existence through reactive behaviour, as interactants react to offence, including instances when they perceive that they have offended others or that someone else has offended them.

Turning now to the term ‘intercultural’, this word literally means ‘between cultures’ and so we first need to comment on our interpretation of culture. As we explain in Chapter 3, the notion of ‘culture’ is very complex, and here we simply present our working definition. Building on the definitions given by Spencer-Oatey (2008c: 3) and Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2019: 14), we define culture as:

a complex set of meaning systems that consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, schemas, norms, and symbols, that are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a social group and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour.

This definition draws attention both to the ‘content’ or cognitive representations of culture, as well as to its cognitive framing (i.e. guiding impact; see Section 3.3.1 and Hong et al., 2000) influence on behaviour and interpretations of behaviour. Chapter 3 explores both of these facets in detail and here we provide an introductory overview, as depicted in Figure 1.1.

We are born into social groups (family, national, etc.), which increase and diversify as we go through life (see Section 3.3). We are socialised into these groups and so develop cultural group affiliations as well as cultural patterning. This patterning (which is interconnected with our group identities) is wide-ranging and covers elements like norms of behaviour, schematic representations

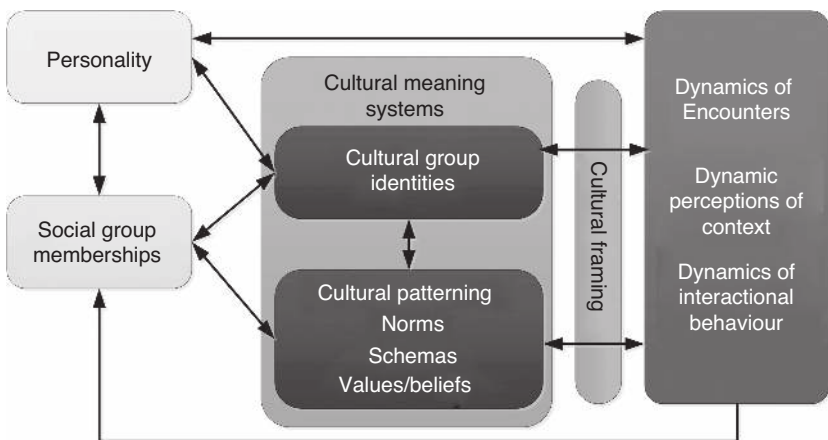


Figure 1.1 Overview of the impact of culture on interaction

of situations, as well as values and beliefs. Our group identities and cultural patterning, along with our individual personality traits (which are also influenced by socialisation), may all influence (but do not determine) the dynamics of the encounters we have with others.

In our book, when we explore the impact of culture within dynamic encounters, we are drawing on evidence for any of the following:

- participants' orientation to group identity (their own or that of their interlocutors);
- differences between interlocutors in their linguistic/behavioural norms;
- differences between interlocutors in the schematic representations they hold (e.g. of role relations, and procedures for a given communicative activity); and
- differences between interlocutors in the values/beliefs that they hold.

Traditionally in cross-cultural psychology, cultural group memberships have been primarily interpreted as national group membership (although there has been work on organisational membership), which has been seen as influencing values which in turn directly influence behaviour. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, this has been challenged in multiple ways and cross-cultural psychologists themselves now realise that that was too simplistic.

Much work within discourse, and – to a certain degree – pragmatics, has focused on the dynamics of encounters and argued that culture is co-constructed in the encounters. While interaction – and cultural stances within an interaction – are definitely co-constructed, our argument would be that participants are still influenced by their personal histories. Social group memberships and socialisation lead to cultural identities and cultural patterning, which in turn influence or frame the bases on which participants make evaluative judgements of other individuals and their behaviour. In other words, participants may be influenced by their perceptions/preconceptions of other social groups, and these perceptions/preconceptions may be influenced by their own personal and group histories. Holliday (2011: 2) argues that “The success of intercultural communication will not be modelled around awareness of and sensitivity to the essentially different behaviours and values of ‘the other culture’, but around the employment of the ability to read culture which derives from underlying universal cultural processes.” In our view, the ability to ‘read culture’ is vital, but we would maintain that this entails in part developing sensitivity to the range of elements that influence both our evaluative judgements of others and the ways in which we ourselves behave and communicate.

We would thus argue that the binary distinction between ‘culture-as-given’ and ‘culture-as-construct’ (Handford et al., 2019), where one perspective on culture is pitted against the other, is unhelpful, as it fails to recognise the importance of both angles and their inherent interconnectedness. Our approach combines acknowledgement of personal histories with the dynamics of

interaction, and our book aims to unpack how cultural identities and cultural patterning can affect the dynamics of interaction.

How then can ‘intercultural’ be defined? Blommaert (1991) asked the question ‘how much culture is there in intercultural communication?’ This draws attention to the important point that the communicative behaviour that occurs in ‘intercultural’ interactions is not all the result of cultural group influences. As Figure 1.1 indicates, on the one hand, culturally based cognition only frames (interpretation of) behaviour. On the other, personality is an additional factor and psychological elements such as tiredness or stress can also influence the dynamic unfolding of an encounter. Here we build on the interpretation given by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin who, drawing on work by Žegarac (2007), define it as follows:

An intercultural situation is one in which the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an effect on interaction/communication that is perceived in some way by at least one of the parties. (based on Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009: 3)

In line with this definition and from the perspective of intercultural politeness, we would argue that the key is participants’ own interpretive perceptions. Often the communication may proceed completely smoothly, and even though participants may have different cultural backgrounds (e.g. in terms of nationality, language, ethnicity), in these situations the interaction would not be intercultural in our terms. Sometimes, though, the interlocutors’ orientations may be in terms of ‘them’ and ‘us’, on the basis of their cultural group identities and attitudes. In these situations, participants may attribute behaviour to cultural differences, when in fact they are actually a reflection of personal idiosyncrasies or goals. We nevertheless regard them as intercultural interactions because that is how one or more of the participants perceives them. In fact, such perceptions are often unhelpful or even harmful overgeneralisations, but in terms of intercultural relations and the process of relating to each other, it is important to examine how such interpretive perceptions influence the process of managing relations. Such incidents need to be analysed and explained, and many of the examples in the book aim to do so.

However, we would maintain that not all problematic encounters necessarily relate to ‘them’ and ‘us’ orientations. Sometimes they may stem from differences in cultural patterning which have an impact on the meaning making process and evaluative judgements. In these cases, each of the participants may negatively evaluate the other because of differing expectations. They may have varying degrees of awareness of the cultural source of these differing expectations. We also treat these instances as ‘intercultural’. Here, gaining a greater understanding of the source(s) of the expectation gaps is usually helpful, in that it can shift the ‘blame’ from the ‘other’ to behavioural patterns, helping

participants realise that the behaviour was not a personal insult but a reflection of someone else's typical pattern.

The Experiential Examples and research data used throughout the book report interactions where one or more of the participants perceives some kind of expectation gap which turns the interaction into an intercultural one for them personally. Our overall orientation and analytic goal is in line with that taken by Scollon et al., who maintain the following:

The real question is, *what good does it do to see a given moment of communication as a moment of intercultural communication?* What kinds of things can we accomplish by looking at it in this way? (2012: 2, italics in the original)

We hope that our step-by-step examination of the relational management process, from both evaluative and performance perspectives, can help throw new light onto the process of relating across cultures, as well as provide a robust framework for analysing relational management and interpersonal relations more broadly.

### 1.3 The Need for This Book

As Kádár and Haugh (2013) argue, a very large body of work in politeness research has focused on comparing how politeness arises in a particular lingua-culture, such as (People's Republic of China) Mandarin Chinese, (British, American, Australian) English, Japanese and Turkish, and then comparing that with how these forms or strategies differ from those in their counterparts. A particularly important work in this strand of research has been Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). This is generally termed cross-cultural pragmatics and politeness research, or contrastive pragmatics in a broader sense, where interactions or other forms of data are "obtained independently from different cultural groups" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008c: 6). There are literally thousands of published studies, including dozens of monographs and edited volumes, that focus on politeness from a cross-cultural perspective.

Such studies continue to be a fundamental area in politeness research, and indeed have contributed a considerable amount to academic understandings of differences in the way politeness arises through different forms and practices across cultures. They thereby provide very useful and important benchmark-type insights and data on particular lingua-cultures. However, from the perspective of intercultural interaction and relational management across cultures, they need to be complemented by the collection, analysis and theorising of fully fledged intercultural data, as well as analytic concepts with roots in intercultural theory. While it has been enormously popular to compare forms and practices that occasion politeness across cultural groups, it has been much less common for researchers to focus on examining understandings of



politeness in interactions where the participants have saliently different (socio)cultural backgrounds claimed by or attributed to them.

In the intercultural field (including cross-cultural psychology), there is a need for new theorising around the nature and impact of culture on behaviour and the evaluation of behaviour. Culture has traditionally been conceptualised primarily in terms of different values, such as individualism/collectivism and high/low power distance, and whole nations or other large social groups are frequently categorised according to their supposedly predominant values. These values have then traditionally been used to make predictions about large groups. There is surprisingly little research on actual interactions. Needless to say, this approach sits very uncomfortably with the pragmatic approach typical within politeness theory and its emphasis on interaction. Nevertheless, its strength lies in its attempt (albeit imperfect) to unpack the concept of culture and to explore the ways in which it might influence behaviour. As we discuss in Chapter 3, recent research and theorising has started to forge new directions which are not at all contradictory with the interactional focus of politeness research.

In our view, both pragmatics and the intercultural field need the insights of the other (for an example of a recent foray of this kind, see Lefringhausen et al., 2019; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2019). One likely reason why to date there has been so little work on *intercultural* (as compared with cross-cultural) politeness is that there has been little theorising of the cultural element. In addition, as we will point out in this book, politeness research has foregrounded an interpretation of ‘interaction’ in a narrow sense – as a synchronous form of communication – and this interpretation prevented research on certain datatypes, such as critical incidents, which are extremely important in intercultural theory. For instance, in various parts of this book we will report on a project – the ‘Hungarians in London’ (HLIC) Project – which the second author of this book conducted by interviewing Hungarians working in London about their life experiences. As excerpts from such interviews will show, such data is fundamental for studying politeness evaluations. Politeness theory could thus benefit significantly from insights emerging on the nature of culture from disciplines such as psychology and intercultural communication. Yet, there is a real need within these disciplines to move beyond group-level generalisations and predictions to explore and understand how, and to what extent, culture has an impact on the practice of intercultural communication at an interactional level. Our aim in this book is therefore to gain new insights into intercultural politeness in interaction by drawing together understandings from different relevant disciplines (primarily pragmatics, cross-cultural psychology and intercultural communication). The data we use in all our chapters is intercultural rather than cross-cultural, and so ‘interculturality’ is central to our analyses (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 2006; Kecskes, 2014); in other words, we focus on



interactions where diverse cultural (i.e. cognitive, affective, social, linguistic) systems come into contact and have a framing effect on the dynamics of the interaction.

It is important to note at this stage that the interdisciplinary nature of this book unavoidably influences our analytic terminology and related conceptualisations of language and culture. Since we aim to bring together research from linguistic pragmatics, intercultural communication and psychology, we unavoidably need to use terms and concepts that are familiar to experts working on one of these areas but not the other. This, in our view, is both the beauty and the inherent challenge of the present scope work, and in the subsequent chapters we will attempt to tackle this problem by carefully defining the technical terms introduced to the reader.

#### 1.4 The Data in the Book and Interpretation

As we discuss in more detail in Sections 2.4 and 17.4, we have used a range of data types and sources in the book, including the following:

- critical incidents
- discourse data
- metapragmatic reflections

We have labelled the critical incidents and metapragmatic comments as ‘Experiential Examples’ (or as Research Reports, if they come from published sources) to help draw attention to the personal and subjective nature of the accounts. We do not attempt to judge whether the experiences were ‘truly’ intercultural or not, or whether the perceived ‘cultural’ element was necessarily ‘factually’ representative of comparable context-based interactions. That would undermine our position that cultural meaning systems differ across individuals and also only frame (i.e. not determine but rather provide a range of possible courses of interaction/interpretation) interactions and interpretations of those interactions. Nevertheless, we do maintain that there can be significant differences across members of different social groups in their cultural meaning systems, which play out in contextually based ways, producing a ‘cultural effect’. We would argue that the key is not to attempt to predict the exact impact of this effect; rather, our aim is to provide a set of concepts and frameworks that individuals can use for interpreting interaction in more mindful and sensitive ways. From a relational point of view, this is the most important focus.

In terms of data sources, many of the examples in the book concern interactions across languages or among people from different national backgrounds, partly because they are more easily available and partly because participants often interpret them most often from an intercultural point of view. However, we also include examples of other types of cultural group difference, such as

differences in ethnicity or religious belief. Moreover, as we also demonstrate in the discussion of the examples, the source of the perceived ‘cultural difference’ can be various and simply attributing it to membership of a particular group is unhelpful. The key is to understand more deeply (some of) the underlying reasons for participants’ relational judgements and interpretations, and our detailed unpacking of the evaluation process aims to address this need.

Some of the Experiential Examples in the book are accounts of incidents experienced by one or other of us. We have included these because of the access they offer to participants’ personal reactions and interpretations, which may be more comprehensive than those through the collection of critical incidents via other means. In the next section, we explain something of our own backgrounds to help readers gain some insights into our whole approach to intercultural politeness.

### 1.5 Authors’ Subjectivity

We are very conscious that our own personal backgrounds and experiences have influenced our approaches to the topic of intercultural politeness. We have both grown up in European contexts and have also each spent substantial time living and working in different parts of the world, especially East Asia. The content and orientation of the book is inevitably influenced by our prior experiences, and to help people interpret our book in this light, we share something of our personal backgrounds.

#### Profile 1.1 Helen Spencer-Oatey

**Position:** Professor, Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK. [www.warwick.ac.uk/hspencer-oatey](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/hspencer-oatey)

**Disciplinary background:** BA Hons in Psychology; MEd with specialisms in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and educational psychology; interdisciplinary PhD – pragmatics and social psychology.

**Research interests:** language and intercultural relations, politeness theory and rapport management; intercultural competence; internationalisation of higher education.

**Inspired by:** unexpected intercultural interactions that challenge my assumptions and expectations; the richness and stimulation of different perspectives and interpretations; the pleasure of working in multicultural teams; my Christian faith and the desire to promote the vision of healed divisions.