

Book review

Understanding Politeness

Dániel Kádár and Michael Haugh, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, 287 pp., ISBN: 978-1-107-03168-5, £22.95 (paperback)



“Understanding Politeness” brings together the work of two scholars who have published extensively in the area of politeness and have contributed significantly to recent developments in the field. The book, therefore, focuses on the authors’ areas of expertise, such as Kádár’s research on historical Chinese politeness (Kádár, 2010, 2011, 2012), as well as his growing interest in rituals (Kádár, 2013). It draws extensively on Haugh’s work, who has analysed politeness in relation to intentions and implicatures (e.g. Haugh, 2007a, 2008, 2014), proposed an interactional approach to the study of politeness (Haugh, 2007b, 2009) and also developed further some existing frameworks, such as Goffman’s (1981) participation framework and Eelen’s (2001) conceptualisation of politeness in terms of evaluations (Haugh, 2010, 2013).

All these fairly recent publications shape the present book, which thus moves away from the focus on linguistic forms dominating much of previous politeness research and towards a view of politeness as a social practice involving interpersonal evaluations of politeness.

Rather than providing a chapter by chapter overview, this review will focus on the challenges analysts adopting such an approach face; namely those of identifying, analysing and defining politeness – and the extent to which the authors manage to overcome them.

The early 2000s saw the publication of several influential monographs taking a discursive approach to the study of politeness (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), but while these publications unanimously state that politeness does not reside in linguistic structures, linguistic structures remain central to the analyses they provide.

We are told that politeness is negotiable and that the use of certain conventionally polite linguistic structures (such as *please* or *thank you*) may not necessarily be intended or perceived as polite. But when discursive politeness scholars assert that politeness is not “necessarily ‘a good thing’” (Mills, 2003:59) or that it “may easily be non-altruistic and clearly egocentric” (Watts, 2005:69), they seem to be saying that politeness (linguistic structures!) is not always polite (good? altruistic?).

Politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987) are no longer tenable, so they are replaced with a much broader group of linguistic structures called “expressions of procedural meaning” (Watts, 2003) and we are told that politic behaviour “consists in ‘paying’ with linguistic resources what is due in a socio-communicative verbal interaction” while politeness consists in paying “more than would normally be required” (2003:115) – a distinction that seems to be solely based on the quantity of linguistic structures employed in a given situation. It seems that with the discursive turn, the notion of politeness became extremely vague while analyses demonstrating participants’ evaluations of politeness remained scarce.

“Understanding Politeness” offers numerous analyses centring on participants’ evaluations and draws on a multitude of types of data, such as extracts from films and comedy series (by far the most frequent source of data in the book), observational data, recordings of naturally occurring conversations, books, novels, poems, newspapers, cartoons, letters, emails, online discussion boards and readers’ comments.

These types of data can be roughly divided into three groups: (1) written sources, such as poems, letters and other documents, which are indispensable for the analysis of politeness in historical contexts and whose analysis necessarily relies on linguistic forms, (2) sources involving meta-participants, such as online discussion forums and online newspapers with readers’ comments, where meta-participants’ provide evaluations of im/politeness (this highly accessible type of data has significantly contributed to the recent shift in politeness research towards evaluations of politeness and extended participation frameworks), and (3) face-to-face conversations, where im/politeness may arise without being evaluated or even oriented to by the participants. The interpretation of this type of data seems least reliable, with the danger of politeness being overlooked or even interpreted into the data by the analyst.

Most of the face-to-face conversations analysed in “Understanding Politeness” are scripted and taken from films, comedy series and books. Naturally occurring conversations, in contrast, are relatively rare in the book; as they are in politeness research in general (though Haugh actually is one of the few politeness researchers who do work with detailed transcripts of recorded conversations). This is not surprising given the restrictions on availability of naturally occurring data and the wealth of easily available film material.

The analysed extracts are very well chosen and the conducted analyses are precise and insightful. They not only focus on participants’ evaluations, but also demonstrate the relevance of a number of concepts neglected in previous politeness research, such as sequentiality and incrementality, to the interpretation of interactions and ways in which im/politeness is co-constructed in them.

What is rather striking though is that most of the analysed extracts illustrate instances of *impoliteness* rather than politeness; with participants offending somebody (pp. 57, 91), criticising (pp. 65, 82) or complaining about (p. 70) somebody’s behaviour, using swearwords (pp. 40, 110), etc. It is the examination of participants’ negative evaluations of somebody’s behaviour that allows the analysts to tap into the expectations of *politeness* motivating these evaluations.

This approach seems to suggest that if we are to analyse politeness without referring to linguistic forms and while relying solely on the perspectives of participants’ in an interaction, we need to do so through identifying acts of *impoliteness*; which are much more likely to be commented on by participants than politeness. This then allows us to gain access to politeness norms underlying negative evaluations of impoliteness, but it does not necessarily provide us with a framework for analysing (evaluations of) *politeness*.

One example in the book that attempts this is an analysis of a ‘ritual’ performance put on by Kádár to encourage his daughter to go to school. The fact that the daughter asks her father to continue with his performance is interpreted as “a case of politeness in the sense of involving an evaluation of support for their relationship” (p. 226). This interpretation seems to be suggesting that, because the father’s performance leads to positive emotions, it is polite, which in turn suggests a very broad understanding of politeness, where politeness is equated with behaviour that is received favourably. What I find problematic about this analysis is that there seems to be a vast range of alternative interpretations of the child’s positive response: The father is not only supportive and entertaining, but he is postponing her having to enter the school building.

So how do we know that it is politeness that arises in this interaction? While in this particular case we have to rely on the analyst’s – who also happens to be a participant – interpretation, one of the advantages of having a recording of the interaction under analysis is that it allows researchers to elicit evaluations from informants, who thus become meta-participants, as demonstrated in one of the studies discussed in the book (pp. 97 & 189; [Chang and Haugh, 2011](#)).

The study is about an intercultural apology offered to a young Taiwanese woman (Joyce) by an Australian acquaintance of her mother (Wayne), following an incident where Wayne did not turn up to a dinner with Joyce, did not cancel or send his apologies, and did not respond to Joyce’s call made from the restaurant. An apology was sent the following day via a text message and took the form of “Sorry I forgot I was busy with something.” This delayed, impersonal message not disclosing any acceptable reason for not turning up can undoubtedly be evaluated as offensive (so we are analysing *impoliteness* again); and it is not clear why Joyce decided to put herself through the experience of following it up with a call (other than for the purpose of recording it – and I keep wondering: Did Wayne know he was being recorded?).

Given this rather awkward situation, its underlying purpose of eliciting a fuller apology (or at least an explanation), and the fact that Wayne and Joyce had never met face to face, it is not surprising that the conversation is characterised by a high degree of disalignment between the speakers, pointing to divergent expectations of what constitutes appropriate behaviour.

To support the analysis, further data was obtained by playing the conversation to both Taiwanese and Australian subjects who were asked to “rate the level of im/politeness of the apology in that call on a five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from “very impolite,” “impolite,” “neither polite nor impolite,” “polite,” through to “very polite” (2011: 424) and interviewed to reveal “the reasons why the respondents evaluated the apology in the way that they did (2011: 425).

While this is an interesting and innovative study design, I keep asking myself if the participants had used any of the ‘politeness evaluators’ if they were simply asked to evaluate the apology in their own words. Has not presenting them with a Likert scale biased them towards evaluating the interaction through terms imposed on them by the analyst? In fact, the interviews revealed that while the Australian participants tended towards describing Wayne’s apology as friendly, the Taiwanese respondents indicated that it lacked sincerity.

The authors’ main concern in presenting this data is that metalinguistic terms referring to politeness need to be viewed within their semantic fields and that these semantic fields are likely to be different across languages and cultures. The semantic field referring to politeness in English, for instance, is said to contain terms such as *courteous*, *considerate* and *friendly* (as well as *polite*), while the Spanish one includes terms such as *cortesía*, *simpatía*, *respeto* and *educación* (p. 190).

While this approach is useful in that it demonstrates that politeness is conceptualised differently in different languages, I would go a step further and argue that we need to consider the full range of terms referring to *appropriate* behaviour – and the role politeness plays within it.

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