Conventionalization: A new agenda for im/politeness research

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Abstract

The first linguistic accounts of im/politeness were proposed to explain departures from the shortest, clearest, and most succinct way of speaking. While this early perspective tied politeness to indirectness, empirical studies from different cultures have shown that it is impossible to circumscribe a closed set of expressions whose utterance guarantees a polite effect in any single culture, let alone universally. I survey five types of evidence – from questionnaire and corpus studies, L1 and L2 acquisition studies and impoliteness studies – that lead me to place at the heart of im/politeness not indirectness but conventionalization as a three-way relationship between expressions, contexts and speakers. Unlike previous semantic-based definitions of conventionalization, this habit-based definition allows that any expression can be conventionalized to a speaker, and is inherently evaluative. The proposal presented in summary form here is that conventionalized expressions (whenever available for a situation or to a speaker) are used all else being equal, irrespective of the degree of face-threat. They can be adapted to a wide range of frequently experienced situations with minimal effort and, while they are the most expedient means of achieving im/politeness, departing from conventionalized expression is also possible and may be associated with either increasing politeness or increasing impoliteness.

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1. From politeness as indirectness...

The ubiquity of performatory utterances has been a tenet of modern linguistics ever since Austin concluded, toward the end of How to do things with words, that every utterance is a performative inasmuch as it is governed by conditions of felicity and infelicity as well as (possibly) truth and falsity (1962:144–145). And while Austin was well aware that ways of performing illocutionary acts are not limited to using a performative verb (1962:148–9), it was not until the advent of politeness theories in the 1970s that a more complete – though by no means exhaustive – listing of the ways in which an illocutionary act could be performed became available. Enumerating some of these, Turner (1996:1) presents us with (1)–(20) below:

(1) Rake the leaves.
(2) Please rake the leaves.
(3) I think you should rake the leaves.
(4) Why don't you rake the leaves?

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(5) Do you think you could rake the leaves?
(6) Don’t you think you could rake the leaves?
(7) Should you rake the leaves?
(8) Shouldn’t you rake the leaves?
(9) You should rake the leaves.
(10) You should rake the leaves, shouldn’t you?
(11) Did you rake the leaves?
(12) The leaves need to be raked.
(13) I think the leaves need to be raked.
(14) Do you think the leaves need to be raked?
(15) Don’t you think the leaves need to be raked?
(16) Might the leaves need to be raked?
(17) Do the leaves need to be raked?
(18) Can I ask you to rake the leaves?
(19) I’m sorry to threaten your negative face but could you rake the leaves?
(20) I’m terribly sorry to bother you with a thing like this and in normal circumstances I wouldn’t dream of it, since I know you’re very busy, but I’m simply unable to do it myself so do you think I could respectively request that you rake the leaves?

to which one might further add the options in (21)–(25):

(21) Did you notice how quickly the leaves piled up this year?
(22) I can’t see the lawn anymore from this window.
(23) All those leaves on the ground can’t be good for the lawn.
(24) The garden needs some work.
(25) Autumn is beautiful but those leaves...

The utterances in (1)–(25) are ordered along what is intuitively felt to be a scale of increasing indirectness. From the unapologetically direct “Rake the leaves” to the elliptical “those leaves . . .,” the assumption is that what is linguistically encoded in these utterances is the speaker’s increasing concern for the addressee. This assumption lies at the heart of what Culpeper (2011a) has called “first wave approaches to politeness,” and is succinctly captured by Leech (1983:108; cf. 2014: 55ff.): “[i]ndirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be” (emphasis added). It likewise guides Lakoff’s (1973) ranking of the Rules of Politeness from R1 (most indirect, used in formal contexts) to R3 (least indirect, used between intimates and friends), and underlies the ordering of Brown and Levinson’s (1987; henceforth B&L) politeness super-strategies from 1. Bald on record, through 2. Positive, and 3. Negative politeness, to 4. Off-record (silence is a fifth, non-verbalizable strategy), along with their assumption that, the greater the potential threat to face, the higher-numbered the strategy the speaker should choose (Figure 1 in B&L:69). This state of affairs is visually represented in Fig. 1, which captures the common assumption that the more indirect one is, the more polite one will be (i.e., the degree of politeness is commensurate with the degree of indirectness). 1

1 First-wave scholars were actually well aware that increased indirectness can also result in impoliteness (B&L:82–83, esp. example (13), and Leech, 1983:171), so this diagram only partially represents their views. However, it accurately represents those views insofar as politeness is concerned (none of those scholars who worked-out theories of impoliteness, although see Leech, 2014:222–223, esp. his claim that “violations are scalar [. . .] just as [in politeness] there are various degrees of observance of the maxims, [in impoliteness] there are various degrees of violation”), since they all assumed a Gricean baseline, departures from which can be quantified and that the greater the departure (= the greater the indirectness), the greater the face-threat calling for redress. This is spelled out in Brown and Levinson’s discussion of Kenny logic (esp. their claim that a rational Model Person ought to choose “a strategy that yields opportunities of minimization proportional to the face threat of the particular FTA”; B&L:90–91) and their summarized argument (B&L:60, esp. clauses v and vi). The possibility that increased indirectness can also be associated with impoliteness, which is touched on in passing by these scholars, does not change these claims but it does mean that in their models, impoliteness is irrevocably tied to nonce context as a particularized conversational implicature (PCI) and this applies to all the strategies – not just to off-record indirectness. In other words, these scholars do not incorporate into their models a notion of impoliteness as a Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI), although they do mention it (B&L:6–7, Leech, 2014:73–4), and as such continue to see the important distinction as being between direct vs. indirect and the weight of impoliteness as carried by indirectness. This is the main difference from the approach advocated here, where the important distinction is between conventionalized vs. nonconventionalized and the weight of impoliteness is carried by conventionalization. I thank Michael Haugh for raising the association between indirectness and impoliteness giving me the opportunity to briefly address the differences here.
In contrast with this view, the picture I explore in this article looks more like Fig. 2. According to this, politeness increases in proportion to the amount of indirectness but only up to a point, after which politeness begins to decrease although indirectness continues to increase. That point is achieved by conventionalized indirectness, which consists in using ”phrases and sentences that have contextually unambiguous meanings (by virtue of conventionalization) which are different from their literal meanings” (B&L:132) and figures also in Brown and Levinson’s scheme as output strategy #1 of their negative politeness super-strategy. The difference between the picture in Fig. 2 and that put forward by Brown and Levinson is that in their scheme conventionalized indirectness is one step below the off-record super-strategy, which they reserve for the most face-threatening situations, as it allows for genuine ambiguity regarding the speaker’s goals.

2. . . to politeness as conventionalization

The possibility that politeness may have more to do with conventionalization than indirectness was first raised by Blum-Kulka (1987) and receives support from a variety of sources, which I review briefly below. Drawing on questionnaire data investigating request behavior in American, Australian, and British English and Hebrew, Blum-Kulka found that conventional indirectness was judged most polite across the board while judgments about the politeness of hints (off-record indirectness) varied: whereas English speakers consistently ranked them second only to conventional indirectness, Hebrew speakers ranked them quite low. In other words, contrary to the common assumption that politeness and indirectness go hand in hand, Blum-Kulka found that more indirectness does not always guarantee more politeness. She accounted for this by surmising that the amount of inferential work the listener must do to extract politeness from the speaker’s utterance constitutes a separate imposition on the hearer’s cognitive resources, which can subtract from the politeness of the utterance. Blum-Kulka went on to propose that politeness lies not in tentativeness but in achieving a balance between coerciveness and clarity. Tipping the balance in either of these directions can result in impoliteness: being too indirect can be as impolite as being too direct – albeit for different reasons.

Since Blum-Kulka’s pioneering study, other questionnaire studies have replicated her results. Comparing American English with Korean, Holtgraves and Yang (1990) found that, while English speakers ranked hints second after conventional indirectness, Korean speakers preferred them for small requests while they resorted to conventional indirectness for larger ones – a finding that goes directly against prediction, since we have less indirectness with greater face-threat. What these findings suggest is that the ambiguity inherent in hints does not always get resolved in favor of
politeness. When the speaker wants to implicate politeness she is on safer grounds doing so using an expression already established for this purpose rather than an illocutionarily ambiguous one.

The association of politeness with conventionalization is also a recurrent finding of corpus studies in a number of languages. As early as 1981, Manes and Wolfson found that 85% of AmE compliments featured three syntactic patterns, with just one pattern (NP is/looks really ADJ) accounting for over 50% of their data. Moreover, the semantics of AmE compliments in their corpus was highly constrained, revolving around five adjectives (nice, good, beautiful, pretty, great) and two verbs (love, like). They concluded that “[t]he combination of a restricted semantic set and an even more restricted set of syntactic structures makes it clear that what we are dealing with here is not simply a matter of frequency. Rather, we are forced to recognize that compliments are formulas, as much as thanks and greetings. [. . .] they are highly structured formulas which can be adapted with minimal effort to a wide variety of situations in which a favorable comment is required or desired” (Manes & Wolfson, 1981:123). Similar findings are reported by Marquez Reiter (2000) for Uruguayan Spanish, and by Terkourafi (2001, 2002) for Cypriot Greek.

Terkourafi (2002) outlines how working- and middle-class customers had distinct ways of realizing requests for goods when walking into a shop for the first time. Working-class customers tended to use exi NP? (‘is there NP?’), while middle-class customers preferred exete NP? (‘do you-PL have NP?’). Both of these formulae use the verb exo (‘to have’) with some form of impersonalization or pluralization, two output strategies falling under Brown and Levinson’s negative politeness (B&L:197–198), making them indistinguishable in their model. Similarly, interviewers and interviewees on live TV and radio broadcasts had distinct ways of realizing requests for some action: interviewers preferred θelo VP (‘I want VP’), while interviewees opted for ᵗa ιθελα VP (‘I would like VP’). The preference for a small number of lexicogrammatical patterns to realize offers and requests in these data poses a challenge to Brown and Levinson’s model: their grouping together of a number of output strategies under a super-strategy which is selected based on the weightiness of an FTA x (Wx) where Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx – suggests that any one of these output strategies should be as good as the next in carrying the day. What these findings show, however, is that different output strategies of the same super-strategy are associated with different extra-linguistic contexts, such that far from being interchangeable, output strategies are constrained directly by the type of extra-linguistic context (rather than by the more abstract sociological variables of Power, Distance and Ranking).

The third type of data that support the centrality of conventionalization to politeness come from studies of acquisition. Here researchers have found that direct teaching to the child of the specific forms to use in different situations is one of two major sources of information about the politeness system available to children. Snow et al. (1990:235) illustrate this with the following AmE example:

(26)  Father: Say ‘please could I have some ketchup’.
    Child: Please.
    Father: Please may I have some ketchup.
    Child: Please.
    Father: Just say the whole sentence for a change: Please may I have some ketchup.
    Child: Please.
    Father: No. We’re gonna wait till you say ‘Please may I have some ketchup.’
    Child: Please can I have the ketchup.

In (26) the father is modeling for the child the expression to use in the current context making it clear that it must be used ‘as is’. This emphasis on the precise words to be used suggests a conceptualization of politeness as a repertoire of expressions that are retrieved as a whole in context and to which speakers have recourse routinely when being (or teaching others how to be) polite.

Studies of second-language acquisition offer further evidence of the importance of conventionalization to politeness. Two types of findings are relevant in this respect. On the one hand, researchers have found that learners produce hints as frequently and in the same situations as native speakers (Weizman, 1993). On the other hand, learners’ ability to recognize and produce conventionalized request expressions preferred by native speakers was found wanting (Phillips, 1993). These findings are hard to reconcile if what is learnt is an underlying relationship between degrees of face-threat and a scale of indirectness (as postulated by B&L:60) and both hints and conventionalized indirectness constitute output strategies falling at different points along that scale. However, they can be made sense of if learners’ use of hints is interpreted as a coping strategy resulting from uncertainty about what conventionalized expressions to use (Trosborg, 1995:228–233). Factors other than calculation of face-threat (e.g., language proficiency, familiarity with the culture) would then explain learners’ less-than-proficient use of conventionalized indirectness.

Yet perhaps the most decisive evidence of the close relationship between conventionalization and politeness comes from studies of impoliteness. Culpeper (2011b:186–193) reports on experimental results that suggest that the politeness of conventionally indirect expressions is hard to erase. He and a colleague asked subjects to rate the impoliteness of three types of commands: direct (‘you be quiet’), conventionally indirect (‘could you be quiet’), and non-conventionally
indirect (‘you aren’t being quiet’) in two types of power conditions: High to Low (e.g., judge to defendant) and Low to High (e.g., defendant to judge). They found that subjects consistently ranked conventional indirectness as least impolite, even when the act itself was incongruous with the context (a defendant commanding a judge). In other words, subjects resisted the idea that a conventionally indirect expression can ever be impolite. That was not the case with non-conventionally indirect expressions, which were almost as impolite as direct ones (see Figure 5.9 in Culpeper, 2011b:190).

The five types of evidence surveyed above converge on the idea that conventionalization is central to politeness. This idea runs counter to the view that speakers shift to more indirect expressions as the need for politeness increases. An additional problem with this view is that it assumes that indirectness can be straightforwardly quantified. A simple look at the list provided at the outset (utterances (2)–(25)) shows that this is easier said than done. In addition to the possibility of hybrid utterances (combining positive and negative politeness), which is explicitly acknowledged by Brown and Levinson (1987:230ff.), how is one to measure the indirectness of the subjunctive against that of a diminutive, an honorific address term, or a conditional format, not to mention different modals? Yet speakers have discrete preferences for them in different contexts, calling for a notion of qualitative indirectness to capture these differences (Terkourafi, 2001:92ff.).

That aside, the alleged association of off-record or non-conventional indirectness with the highest degree of politeness was not confirmed. The ambiguity about the speaker’s goals characterizing non-conventional indirectness (B&L:211) that prompted first-wave scholars to deem it optimal for politeness (conceptualized as tentativeness and freedom from imposition) allows too many other interpretations (including deniability, manipulation, etc.) to be universally associated with politeness. That is where conventionalized indirectness comes in. With the backing of repeated usage, it achieves politeness much more transparently and almost unequivocally. This explains why it is favored across cultures and why its politeness is hard to undermine. At the same time, it suggests a renewed understanding of politeness, not as tentativeness, but as providing outward displays of one’s familiarity with the norms governing the current exchange and claiming a “positive social value” for oneself (Goffman, 1955:213) on account of that. In this renewed understanding of politeness, the crucial distinction is not between direct vs. indirect but between conventionalized vs. non-conventionalized. The proposal presented in summary form here, therefore, and elaborated elsewhere (Terkourafi, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, forthcoming) is that conventionalized expressions (whenever available for a situation or to a speaker) are used all else being equal, irrespective of the degree of face-threat. They can be adapted to a wide range of frequently experienced situations with minimal effort and, while they are the most expedient means of achieving politeness, departing from conventionalized expression is also possible and may be associated with either increasing politeness or increasing impoliteness.

3. Defining conventionalization

At this point, it is paramount to clarify what I mean by “conventionalization.” I consider an expression to be conventionalized for some use relative to a context for a speaker if it is used frequently enough in that context to achieve a particular illocutionary goal to that speaker’s experience. This makes conventionalization a three-way relationship between an expression, a context, and a speaker. I comment separately on each of these below.

By “expression” I mean a form of words, including their prosodic contour, that tend to be used together to achieve a particular illocutionary goal. That is, an expression is a specific form/function combination with certain parts being fixed and others being open variables, akin to constructions in Construction Grammar (Goldberg, 2006). Examples include the ubiquitous ‘Can you VP?’ for requests, but also ‘NP is/looks really ADJ’ for compliments in AmE, and ‘exi NP/exete NP?’ for requests in some transactional contexts in Cypriot Greek. “Context” refers to the situational context which, by a process of abstraction over real-world contexts, comes to be stored in memory as a combination of extra-linguistic features that include, but are not limited to, the age, gender, and social class of the interlocutors, the relationship between them, and the setting of the exchange – what Terkourafi (2009) calls a “minimal context.” The precise list of extra-linguistic features as well as their relative weights can vary: ethnicity may be important for some expressions but not others. What matters is that certain social features of the situation that are often preemptively fixed from sensory data are recorded together for the purposes of classification and easy retrieval as a whole later on (cf. Minsky, 1975). The combination of an expression with a minimal context thus understood is what I call a “frame” (Terkourafi, 2001, 2009, 2012). The final parameter in the above definition is the speaker. Because conventionalization is a matter of one’s experience, the degree to which an expression is conventionalized relative to a context can vary for different speakers, as well as for the same speaker over time. An expression can be conventionalized for two people, for members of a group (e.g., a sports team), for a social category (e.g., men), or for an entire language variety/culture (e.g., American English).^2

^2 At this point the expression goes from what Morgan (1978) called a “convention of usage” to being a “convention of the language” with the concomitant structural consequences.
An example will make this clearer. The expression “my bad!” is described as “an American idiom . . . made popular by basketball players in playground games in the 1970s and 1980s. It usually means “my fault”, “my mistake”, “I apologize” or “mea culpa”. It gained popularity with urban players of streetball and then spread into mainstream popularity”. 3 Pullum (2005) relates how he heard it used “by an assistant professor of philosophy from Princeton giving a lecture in the Department of Philosophy at Harvard.” At that point, we can say that the expression ‘my bad!’ had gone through all the stages of conventionalization described above.

The first time a basketball player said ‘my bad!’ to another to apologize, the listener would have had to derive the meaning of apology as a Particularized Conversational Implicature (Grice, 1975) from what is, after all, an elliptical expression (instantiating off-record indirectness for B&L:227) in conjunction with the real-world context – and to decide whether that was a polite way of apologizing drawing on the available contextual clues (body language, etc.). However, once other basketball players started using ‘my bad!’ to apologize, it became less and less necessary to go through the full process of implicature derivation: exposure to repeated uses of it as an apology in that type of context would be enough to ensure prompt identification of its illocutionary force by group members. ‘My bad!’ would then be understood as an apology via an I-type Generalized Conversational Implicature (Levinson, 2000) associated with the minimal context of being basketball players on the court (the stereotypical way of apologizing in that minimal context, an mGCI; Terkourafi, 2009).

At the same time, by virtue of being stereotypical for apologies in that context, ‘my bad!’ would be understood as polite in that context: per the definition of politeness in section 2 above, it evidences the speaker’s familiarity with the norms of urban streetball and constitutes the speaker’s face (“claims a positive value”) on account of that. As the expression spread beyond basketball courts, its gradual detachment from context progressed further, and more and more of the meaning of apology with associated evaluation as polite that was originally bolstered by context began to “rub off” on the expression itself becoming part of its default (presumed) meaning irrespective of context (a GCI; Levinson, 2000). By the time Pullum heard it at Harvard in the mid-2000s, ‘my bad!’ could be considered conventionalized for apologies in AmE as a whole (although possibly still associated with young males) and it has since spread to other varieties of English as well (M. Haugh, personal communication).

Conventionalization as defined above is inherently evaluative: when we learn, through socialization in a community or group, that “this is the way to do some thing” (“the way to apologize in a basketball court/as a hip US male is to say ‘my bad!’” “the way to ask for goods as a first-time middle-class customer in a store in Cyprus is to say ‘exete NP?’“), what we are implicitly learning is that this is the right way of doing this thing (apologizing, requesting goods) in this type of context. That is, the polite evaluation is part and parcel of conventionalization and politeness falls out as a by-product of uttering the expression in this context rather than being communicated as a separate message of the speaker’s utterance. At the same time, the evaluative link between expression and context to the speaker’s experience renders other expressions in this context marked to various degrees for this speaker, requiring extra steps to decide whether they are polite or not.

A comparison between this definition and that of Brown and Levinson reveals some important differences. In their scheme, conventionalized indirectness is deemed to effect a compromise between being direct and not coercing the addressee (B&L:130–132). Consequently, they classify it under negative politeness and expect that the conventionalized meaning of an expression and its literal one will be different. 4 None of these assumptions are made here. Because the current definition is frequency-based and the polite evaluation falls out from the association of the expression with the context directly (rather than being mediated by the expression’s degree of departure from a ‘direct’ baseline), any expression (not only negatively polite ones) can be conventionalized and it is perfectly possible for an expression’s literal meaning (if we admit of such a notion) 5 and its conventionalized one to coincide. This accounts for a host of empirical studies that found that not only negatively polite strategies, but also positively polite ones (requests stating a future course of action in Ojibwa; Rhodes, 1989), off-record ones (irony used by women in informal settings in Tzeltal; Brown, 1995), and even bald-on-record ones (bare imperatives as requests in Cypriot Greek; Terkourafi, 2001) can be the most frequent realizations of speech acts in particular contexts, making the speaker’s goal illocutionarily transparent to the addressee and her utterance polite in one and the same time. On this view of conventionalization (which contrasts starkly with the semantic one in the rest of the literature, including B&L), the listener who receives, say, an imperative in Cypriot Greek in a context where imperatives are the normal way of requesting (which is most contexts in this variety of Greek, including employee to boss and seller to customer), will not only likely 6 interpret it as a request but will also be aware that this is the


4 By virtue of admitting a notion of direct illocutionary force, both Brown and Levinson (1987:133) and Leech subscribe to some form of the Literal Force Hypothesis (the hypothesis that there is a simple force:form correlation). Leech (2014:73) casts the LFH as a probabilistic assumption.

5 Criticisms of literal meaning range from the well-known weaknesses of the Literal Force Hypothesis (Levinson, 1983:264ff.) to more recent contextualist critiques (Récanati, 2003).

6 Since the Literal Force Hypothesis is not taken as a starting point, interpretations of illocutionary force are probabilistic and no semantic expression has privileged relationship with a particular illocutionary force.
most common way of performing requests in this context. Conventionalization consists precisely in having this kind of meta-knowledge about not what expressions mean but how often they mean that. This meta-knowledge is crucial to politeness: using what is to the listener’s experience the most common way of requesting in this context is a token of the speaker’s familiarity with the norms governing the current exchange and by using it the speaker has done what is ‘right’ (positively evaluated by the hearer) in this context. This habit-based concept of politeness is in stark contrast with the rationality-based one championed by previous work. It is also clearly a second-order concept, unrestricted by first-order understandings of politeness, which are tied to particular cultural settings and groups.

I have presented in this article the bare bones of an alternative agenda for im/politeness research. This agenda is diagrammatically represented in Fig. 3, where the distinction between conventionalized (politeness as an NCIC) and nonconventionalized (politeness as a PCI) is distributed over the two inner and two outer circles respectively. At the heart of this agenda lies the notion of conventionalization, understood as a three-way relationship between expressions, contexts and speakers. Unlike previous semantic-based definitions of conventionalization, this habit-based definition allows that any expression can be conventionalized to a speaker, and is inherently evaluative. A large number of studies support this alternative, forcing us to reconsider the once prevailing conceptualization of politeness as indirectness. It will be exciting to pursue this agenda as our range of data continues to expand, covering different historical periods (historical sociopragmatics), large amounts of spontaneous data (corpus pragmatics), and impoliteness, all areas to which the honoree of this Festschrift, Jonathan Culpeper, has made seminal contributions.

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