

# Linguistic politeness: The implicature approach<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

*This paper pursues an analysis of politeness as a Gricean implicature. My claim is that this analysis captures both uses of politeness: politeness as the expected thing to do, the rule, as well as unexpected politeness, a voluntary contribution to communication by an individual speaker. Moreover, it covers cases in which politeness is employed as a strategy to achieve smooth interaction and cases in which it is employed in order to convey some message to the addressee. In order to be able to analyse politeness as an implicature, I propose a Maxim of Politeness which supplements Grice's Cooperative Principle. This maxim, like the other four, can be observed or flouted and so give rise to different kinds of implicatures. The addition of the Maxim of Politeness to the CP is necessary in order to account for multiple implicatures generated by the same utterance in the same situation.*

The act or behaviour of being polite is performed by an individual agent and yet it is, at the same time, an intrinsically social one, social, that is, in the dual sense of being socially constituted and of feeding back into the process of structuring social interaction. It is in this latter sense that we might speak of the *power of politeness*, the power of a symbolic medium that, being used and shaped in acts of individual speakers, also represents social standards of how to behave or of what kind of conduct is considered 'just and right'. Politeness thus mediates between the individual and the social, motivating and structuring courses of action as well as being instrumental in performing them. (Werkhofer 1992: 156)

## **0. Introduction**

According to Werkhofer, the power of politeness consists in operating at both the social and the individual level. On the one hand, it is the ex-

pected thing to do and the individuals have to comply, otherwise they are likely to convey implicatures of rudeness; on the other hand, competent speakers as members of a social group can exploit the norm and convey something more than what is expected. So politeness, in addition to being a strategy employed in order to achieve smooth interaction, can convey indirect messages to the addressee, i. e. implicatures of politeness. What makes politeness an even more powerful medium in communication is that these implicatures can re-shape the social relationship between the participants (e. g. by increasing the degree of intimacy between them).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the place of politeness in a linguistic theory of human interaction and to propose an analysis of politeness as an implicature à la Grice, i. e. as an implicated message delivered by the speaker indirectly to be interpreted by the hearer on the basis of shared knowledge of the world and of the specific situation (relationship of the participants, degree of imposition, etc.). First I will discuss different forms of linguistic politeness and make a distinction between expected and unexpected politeness in communication. The point of this distinction is to help me argue that different forms of politeness convey different messages, an argument crucial for my analysis of politeness as an implicature. Then I will present some of the existing theories of linguistic politeness and try to show their shortcomings. Finally, I will propose a modification of the Gricean framework through the addition of a Maxim of Politeness, which will enable Grice's theory of conversational implicature to account for the different instances of linguistic politeness.

## **1. Linguistic politeness phenomena**

The notion of politeness is hard to capture. People seem to be able to judge whether an act (linguistic or nonlinguistic) or an utterance is polite or not, but defining politeness is a complicated matter. If we consider that perceptions of politeness change through time and vary from culture to culture, then the complexity of the matter starts to become obvious.

Haverkate (1988) proposes a typology of politeness strategies which comprises linguistic, non-linguistic and metalinguistic forms. He distinguishes between categories of politeness occurring at a non-communicative level (acts usually prescribed in etiquette manuals, like opening a door), functional and formal categories. Functional categories of politeness are linked with its sociocultural aspect and occur either in metacommunicative interaction, which involves phatic communion (e. g. saying something just to avoid uncomfortable silence) and discourse etiquette (e. g. not interrupting the current speaker), or in communicative interaction. At the level of communicative interaction, speech acts are classified

as polite (e. g. thanking, apologizing), impolite (e. g. threatening and insulting) and non-impolite (directive and assertive speech acts).<sup>2</sup> The illocution of non-impolite speech acts is 'neutral as regards politeness' (1988: 394) but a polite realisation is still possible, e. g. by employing a polite tone of voice or an indirect variant of the speech act one wants to perform, or using modal particles, rhetorical devices like understatement and litotes, etc. These strategies, which Haverkate calls formal categories, constitute the pragmalinguistic aspect of politeness.

The threefold distinction of speech acts regarding their politeness degree is useful inasmuch as it makes clear that the polite/impolite distinction is inadequate since a great number of acts fall under neither category. I want to argue, however, that classifying speech acts under these three headings according to their illocutionary force alone is intuitively wrong. My claim is that thanking and apologising may always be the polite thing to do, but some instances of thanking and apologising are perceived as more polite according to their relevance in discourse (whether they were expected or not) and the politeness features that accompany them (upgraders, hyperbole, an appropriate tone of voice, etc.), whereas other instances pass unnoticed because they were expected and/or they were produced in a minimal form ('thank you', 'I'm sorry'). For this reason I prefer to view the politeness degree of an act not as an inherent property depending on its illocution, but as a variable value depending on certain form features of the utterance realising the act. This means that acts classified by Haverkate as polite, as well as his non-impolite acts, can be performed with different degrees of politeness.

On the other hand, there is a point in seeing that politeness is not only a matter of form (presence of politeness markers in an utterance) but also of content. I shall claim, however, that content alone contributes to politeness effects only if it is unexpected in a given situation. So some of Haverkate's polite acts are judged to be only neutral by the hearers depending on the context in which they have occurred, in particular depending on whether the speaker was expected to produce a polite act (e. g. thanking someone for a present) or not. For this reason a distinction based on the context rather than the illocutionary force gives us better results.

Lakoff's (1989) proposal is a step in this direction. Similar to Haverkate, Lakoff also sees the limitations of a polite/non-polite dichotomy and proposes a threefold distinction of polite behaviour: polite, non-polite and rude. However, she bases her classification not on the illocutionary force or the propositional content of an utterance alone, but relates it to the discourse type in which the given utterance occurs, i. e. whether the discourse is intended primarily for communicating information or for supporting social relations. So, whereas both non-polite and

rude behaviour do not follow the rules of politeness,<sup>3</sup> non-polite behaviour occurs in discourse types where politeness is not expected (and so is not considered to be a violation of the rules). Rude behaviour, on the other hand, *is* a violation of the rules of politeness since it occurs in discourse types when conformity with the rules of politeness is expected. Polite behaviour is defined by Lakoff independently of discourse type: an utterance is polite when it sticks to the rules of politeness, whether expected or not.<sup>4</sup> Lakoff's classification seems to be empirically more plausible than Haverkate's, but still there are several other factors that need to be taken into consideration in the classification of forms of politeness.

A look at the distinctions among different instances of politeness that have been made so far by different authors makes this last point obvious. Hill *et al.* (1986) distinguish between *volition* and *discernment*. Discernment covers the cases where the selection of the linguistic form by a speaker occurs automatically because of the highly prescriptive nature of the sociolinguistic system. Discernment 'defines one's minimal obligations within the polite-use sub-system' (Hill *et al.* 1986: 351). Therefore participants are expected to conform to it by using the prescribed appropriate forms. If they do not, the result is undesirable for both participants: 'to ignore its requirements brings social punishment; that is, violations of the rules of Discernment offend others and thus hurt the speaker's social image' (*ibid.*).

*Volition*, on the other hand, covers the cases in which the speaker is allowed a more active choice. There is not a unique possibility of being polite in a given situation but a range of possible forms the speaker can use, with or without modifications, to convey politeness. Hill *et al.* claim that both factors are present in every language/culture but to a different extent, which partly accounts for cultural variation in the use of politeness forms.

Hill *et al.*'s distinction does not touch upon the politeness degree of forms. It only refers to the occurrence of one or very few forms in a particular context in one language versus a variety of forms in the same context in another language, and it assumes that the conveyed politeness degree is the same, i. e. the expected, the appropriate. Presumably, in the cases where the occurrence of a form is a result of volition (choice) rather than discernment (prescription), a difference in the politeness degree must be easy to achieve. Still, it would be interesting to know whether it is possible to be more polite than prescribed, something that Hill *et al.* do not discuss.

Kasper (1990) distinguishes between strategic politeness and politeness as social indexing. The term *strategic politeness* covers the cases in which participants employ politeness in order to avoid the conflicts that could

arise through the performance of face threatening acts.<sup>5</sup> They use politeness as a strategy to achieve certain goals in communication, such as, for example, to save their interlocutor's as well as their own face. This is a universal phenomenon, but there is some variation across cultures according to the type of strategy employed (e. g. strategies that emphasise deference vs. solidarity, cf. Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) negative and positive politeness strategies).

Politeness as social indexing, on the other hand, is employed 'independently of the current goal a speaker intends to achieve' (1990: 196). This type of politeness covers, for example, the choice of pronouns and address forms which reflect attributes like a) macrosocial properties of individuals (ascribed characteristics like age, sex, family position; or achieved social properties like rank, title, social position) and b) the individuals' situated performance.

For Kasper this social indexing aspect of politeness is the same as discernment, since it is prescribed by the participants' personal and social identity. Nevertheless, she goes on to make the point that if a speaker does not use the prescribed form, the addressee comes to the conclusion that some covert information was implicated.

A distinction based on the function of the polite forms (whether they are employed in order to help the speaker reach a goal or to demonstrate the status of the hearer and the social or personal relation between the participants), clear-cut as it seems to be, is still problematic, since speakers can also use the indexing type in order to achieve their goals in communication. 'Yet where speakers are free to choose between alternative social markers, for instance terms of address, such choices may well reflect strategic decisions,' Kasper (1990: 197) herself observes.

In the distinctions proposed by Hill *et al.* and by Kasper (as well as in Haverkate's and Lakoff's threefold classifications), neither the degree of politeness conveyed by the forms employed nor that the individual's contribution to politeness has been taken into consideration. The distinction provided by Watts (1989; 1992) comprises the dimension degree of politeness as well as the dimension obligatoriness/optionality of the occurrence of a certain form which was the basis of Hill *et al.*'s (and to a certain extent of Kasper's) distinction. Watts calls his two types of politeness *politic* and *polite verbal behaviour*. He defines politic behaviour as 'socioculturally determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group, whether open or closed, during the ongoing process of interaction' (Watts 1989: 135). Since politic behaviour is *determined* by the social context, it is similar to discernment and to the social indexing function of politeness as described by Kasper (1990). However, if we were to understand *determined* as *pre-*

*scribed*, this would be a narrow interpretation. Watts includes under politic verbal behaviour all the *relevant* forms that are expected to occur in a given context. So the primary feature of politic verbal behaviour is not that it is determined in the sense of prescribed, but that it is relevant in the context in which it occurs, in the sense of unmarked. *Politic* behaviour is expected; it is the norm. Therefore it can also include cases of Kasper's strategic politeness, cases of both polite and non-impolite acts as defined by Haverkate and cases of Lakoff's polite (behaviour that follows the rules of politeness when conformity is expected) and non-polite behaviour (behaviour that does not follow the rules of politeness when conformity with the rules is not expected).

*Polite* verbal behaviour, on the other hand, is marked in the sense that it is 'more than merely politic' (Watts 1992: 51). It 'represent(s) the attempt by *ego*, for whatever reason, to enhance his/her standing with respect to *alter*' (Watts 1992: 57). Thus, polite verbal behaviour covers cases of volition, some of the cases of strategic politeness (the ones in which a very polite strategy is selected), some cases of politeness as social indexing (the ones that exploit the use of address forms), some cases of Haverkate's polite acts (the ones in which the acts were produced when they were not really expected, e. g. apologising when the speaker did not do anything wrong) as well as Haverkate's non-impolite acts (the ones that are realised in a very polite way, i. e. with politeness markers, hedges, understatement, polite pessimism, etc.) and some cases of Lakoff's polite behaviour (behaviour that follows the rules of politeness when conformity is not expected).

Watts also mentions a second case of marked behaviour, the case of *non-politic behaviour*, which leads to communicative breakdowns. These are instances of rudeness, which fail to meet the standards expected and cause offence. The result is a threefold distinction between unmarked neutral forms (politic behaviour), marked positive forms (polite behaviour) and marked negative forms (non-politic behaviour).

The advantage of this threefold distinction is that it is based neither on inherent properties of the acts (as in Haverkate's typology) nor on rigid prescriptions, but on expectations that depend on the context (not just the discourse type, as in Lakoff's classification, but in particular the social activity and the speech event within a given culture and the power and social distance relations as defined within that culture). These expectations can be fulfilled or exploited; the norms can be followed or violated by the individual speaker who wishes to convey an additional message. Politeness, then, in its different forms and various degrees, can be either a strategy or an expression of the speaker's feelings (cf. von der Gabelentz' [1891] *psychologische Modalität der Höflichkeit* 'psychological modality of politeness' and Kallia [in press] for discussion).

This function of politeness as a medium for communicating extra meaning should be incorporated in a linguistic analysis of politeness. In particular, a comprehensive theory of linguistic politeness should capture the dual nature of politeness, its social and its individual aspect and the interaction between these two. In order to be able to do that, it is essential that we consider the analysis of politeness as an implicature.

In the next section I will first sketch the implications of analysing politeness as an implicature and as the norm, and then I will go on to discuss how politeness can be subsumed under Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP), so that its being both the norm and an individual contribution can be accounted for.

## **2. Analyses of politeness**

### *2.1. Politeness as an implicature: an introduction*

Implicatures, a term introduced by Grice in 'Logic and conversation' (1967), are extra messages conveyed by speakers indirectly. By 'extra' we mean that sometimes they supplement the meaning of what the speaker has said, as in (1), sometimes they provide additional information, as in (2), and sometimes they convey something completely different from what the speaker has said, as in (3).

- (1) A: I've run out of petrol.  
B: There is a petrol station round the corner.  
+ > <sup>6</sup> ... and you can get some petrol there now.
- (2) (Mother to child)  
Have you brushed your teeth?  
+ > It's time to go to bed.
- (3) (On a rainy day)  
Wonderful weather today!  
+ > The weather is terrible and I hate it.

Implicatures are calculated by the hearer on the basis of the knowledge s/he shares with the speaker, the general knowledge s/he has of the world, knowledge of the particular situation, the semantic content of the utterance produced and the assumption that the speaker is being cooperative (cf. § 3.1 below). The important difference between implicatures and other inferences a hearer may draw on the basis of what the speaker has said is that implicatures are intended by the speakers, that is, the speaker wants the hearer to arrive at the implicature. Therefore the meaning of the implicature is as much part of the meaning of the utterance as its semantic meaning.

Let me demonstrate the difference between implicatures and other inferences with an example:

- (4) (A child walks into the kitchen and takes some popcorn)

Father: I thought you were practicing your violin.

Child: I need to get the (violin) stand.

Father: Is it under the popcorn?

(From Mey 1993: 84)

Apparently, the father thinks that the child is lying and trying to find an excuse not to practice the violin. This is an inference that the father drew knowing his child (who does not like practicing) and knowing that the violin stand is usually not in the kitchen. Therefore, if anyone is actually looking for it, they should try another room in the house. It is clear, however, that the child, when he produced the utterance ‘I need to get the (violin) stand’ did not want his father to think that he was just producing an excuse and that he did not want to practice. On the contrary, what the child actually intended the father to understand is something like (4a):

- (4) a. ‘I know that you think that I am trying not to practice but I have a very good reason for being here. I’m looking for the violin stand without which I cannot practice.’

This is the message the child wants to convey to the father, and the father understands this – even if he does not believe it. Only this message (4a) is an implicature, because only this is intended by the speaker.

The distinction between implicatures and any other inferences (i. e. deductions based on linguistic or non-linguistic evidence, cf. Thomas 1995: 58 ff.) is very useful in the discussion of politeness. I shall claim that certain uses of politeness produce implicatures, that is, messages deliberately conveyed by the speaker to the hearer, whereas in other cases the hearer just infers that the speaker has said something because he wants to be polite, without the speaker’s actually intending the hearer to think so. Consider (5):

- (5) (Mary has cooked dinner)

Mary: I’m sorry. The carrots are overdone.

John: No, they’re exactly right.

Similar to the father in (4) thinking that the child was lying, Mary may think that John is just being polite. However, it is more plausible to



claim that John is trying to reassure Mary that everything is alright rather than conveying that he is lying because he wants to be polite, so even if Mary interprets John's utterance as a lie motivated by politeness, it is not an *implicature* of politeness. What a speaker wants to convey when s/he is being polite is some consideration for the hearer's feelings, a message like 'I like you/empathise with you, etc.' (cf. Kallia (in press)) and not 'I am (just) being polite', which would be equivalent in this case to 'I do not really mean what I am saying' (cf. also § 3.2 below). This is a reason why speakers may prefer not to stick to the expected degree of politeness but to exceed it, to make their utterances more polite in content and/or in form. Being creative with politeness, i. e. adding onto the expected polite content and form, helps to avoid making the hearer think that the speaker is only following the social rules and is not being sincere (i. e. to avoid the hearer *inferring* that the speaker is just being polite). (Cf. also Sifianou's distinction between routine and non-routine compliments [Sifianou 2001].)

The idea that politeness gives rise to implicatures actually originated in Grice's work. Grice provided a place for politeness in his theory. In the presentation of his maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner [cf. § 3.1 below]), he considered the existence of further maxims and gave politeness as an example: 'There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as "Be polite", that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures' (1967/1989: 28). Nevertheless, Grice did not make clear how one such potential maxim relates to the four maxims he outlined or what the exact content of this maxim might be.

Some answers to these two questions seem to be given by Leech (1983), who also included politeness in his discussion of pragmatic principles. Leech gave politeness the status of a principle: "Minimize (other things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs," and there is a corresponding positive version ("maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs.")' (Leech 1983: 81). The relationship between Leech's Politeness Principle (PP) and the Cooperative Principle (CP) as sketched by Grice (cf. § 3.1 below) is one of competition: Leech sees being polite as in conflict with being cooperative, in the sense that it is often the case that speakers cannot follow the one without violating the other and therefore find themselves in a dilemma about which one to choose. Moreover, he described the content of his PP in detail by describing the maxims it consists of: Tact, Approbation, Sympathy, Generosity, Modesty, Agreement (cf. Leech 1983). Leech's approach is not unproblematic, as we will see later.<sup>7</sup>

If politeness is to be analysed as an implicature, as I will argue, there are three questions that need to be discussed:

- a) What is the relation between being polite and being cooperative, and can the Gricean model capture this relation?
- b) Do all instances of politeness generate implicatures?
- c) What exactly is the message conveyed by a polite utterance?

Before I turn to these questions, I would like to present the position I will be arguing against, i. e. that politeness is the rule and does not communicate any extra messages.

## 2.2 *Politeness as the rule, no message*

The main representative of this position is Fraser (1990). In his view, participants, on entering a conversation, assume a set of rights and obligations that must be observed and that make up the Conversational Contract. He sees polite behaviour as part of this conversational contract between interlocutors. Participants are obliged to be polite and they have the right to expect politeness from the other participants. So politeness is the rule in conversation. It is anticipated and therefore is not noticed when it occurs, and if it is not noticed, then it can be no additional message. What is noticed is the violation of the rule, when a participant breaks the Conversational Contract and behaves rudely.

A similar position is expressed by Kasper (1990): ‘Competent adult members comment on the absence of politeness where it is expected, and its presence when it is not expected’ (1990: 193). Notice, however, that according to this position only expected politeness goes unnoticed, which brings us back to the distinction between expected politeness (the rule, the unmarked case, the politic form) and unexpected politeness (the exception, the marked case, the polite form in Watts’ sense).

In Meier’s (1995) account of politeness, which defines politeness as appropriateness (and therefore her analysis can be grouped together with Fraser’s), it becomes obvious how difficult it is to argue for politeness as the rule and as a strategy carrying no implicatures (extra messages) whatsoever. Meier examines politeness used in repair work and concludes that it is employed ‘to show that the speaker is a “good guy” (despite having violated a social norm) and can be relied upon in the future to act predictably in accordance with the social norms of a particular reference group (i. e. to act appropriately)’ (1995: 389). However, I see a contradiction at this point. If the speaker wants to show something, then he wants to convey a message, and this ‘I’m a good guy’ is a very good example for a politeness implicature, as I want to analyse

them. Demonstrations like this (or messages, as I want to call them) can never be the rule, in the sense that they cannot always be expected. In fact, they are idiosyncratic and depend on the individual speaker. Interestingly, Meier does mention cases of ‘overpoliteness’, cases in which the speaker is more polite than expected, but for Meier these are instances of failure in communication, ‘“over” thus implying an inappropriate degree’ (*ibid*: 387). Meier does not consider the case of creative overpoliteness (cf. 3.2. below) that can convey additional messages.

Finally, another similar position can be found in Escandell-Vidal (1996). She claims that politeness (both conventionally indirect forms like [6] and non-informative polite utterances like [7]) has low relevance<sup>8</sup> (i. e. ‘it has some [though not very strong] cognitive effects’<sup>9</sup> [1996: 644]).

(6) Can you pass the salt?

(7) Oh! You’ve had your hair cut!

In other words, politeness is expected, and it is its absence rather than its presence which is noticed. It is this markedness of impoliteness that makes the use of polite forms necessary: ‘“Politeness” is thus necessary in order to avoid triggering unwanted implications of impoliteness’ (1996: 645). This is again only half the story. A non-informative polite utterance like (7) may be unmarked in a certain situation (when the participants are friends), but it becomes marked when the relation between the participants is less intimate. In this second type of situation, if the utterance was not expected, then its occurrence is bound to give rise to implicatures (cf. Kallia [in press]).

### *2.3 Intermediate position: Some forms of politeness are messages*

So far I have presented two opposite positions regarding the analysis of politeness: politeness seen as an implicature, as a message the speaker conveys indirectly, and politeness seen as the rule and therefore not involving any extra messages. The discussion of the different politeness forms that preceded, however, has shown that we cannot treat all instances of politeness as the norm and that there is a great deal of free space for participants to play with language, to combine different politeness features and convey politeness to the extent they want.

This thesis is also supported by Jary (1998), who attempts to account for politeness as an act of communication<sup>10</sup> in the framework of Sperber and Wilson’s (1986/1995) Relevance Theory. According to Jary, politeness is communicated when ‘(a) (the speaker’s behaviour) provides evi-

dence for the hearer that the assumptions he had considered mutually manifest were not in fact so, (b) it is the speaker's intention that this is the case, (c) this intention is mutually manifest' (Jary 1998: 6f.). More specifically, Jary claims that with every realisation of a face threatening act, the speaker informs the hearer how he rates the weightiness of a face threatening act as it is composed by the three parameters proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978: 81):

$$W_x = P(H, S) + D(H, S) + R_x$$

$W_x$  = weightiness of the act      P = power      D = social distance  
 $R_x$  = rating of imposition      H = hearer      S = speaker

At this point two things can happen: either the form the speaker has chosen corresponds to the hearer's assessment of  $W_x$ , in which case no polite message is communicated (because there is no change in the hearer's cognitive environment<sup>11</sup>), or there is a mismatch between the hearer's and the speaker's assessments of  $W_x$ . In this case a change in the hearer's cognitive environment does occur. If this change is intended by the speaker (i. e. is not the result of an accidental misvaluation) and the hearer realises that this is the case, then an additional level of communication is conveyed, the politeness message. Jary defines this message very specifically: 'I hold you in higher/lower regard than you had assumed', depending on whether the speaker has been more polite than or not as polite as expected. In his further discussion Jary limits the cases in which politeness constitutes a message to instances of repair work, following Meier (1995). Although I think we should not limit the possible politeness implicatures – neither to this one message, nor to cases of repair only, nor to instances of polite form alone – the analysis I want to support is compatible with Jary's approach.

Jary distinguishes between politeness as a message and politeness as a strategy to avoid unwanted implications, depending on whether the hearer attributes to the speaker an intention to change their mutual cognitive environment or not. This may sound arbitrary at first, but a cue to the speaker's intentions is given by his/her 'choice of stimulus', i. e. choice of linguistic form or pragmatic strategy. In my opinion two points need to be introduced at this stage of the analysis: First, it is not only the form of the utterance but also its content (propositional content and/or illocutionary force) that give rise to politeness implicatures and second, if we want to be able to claim that a linguistic form or a certain speech act in a given context does or does not generate politeness implicatures, we must classify it not just as polite or not – but as polite (positive), neutral (appropriately polite, *politic* in Watts' terms) or impolite (negative).

I claim that there is a minimum of politeness expected in a given situation, as far as both form and content are concerned. This minimum is realised by performing the act through one or more appropriate formulae (which indicates the discernment/volition analogy in a culture). This is the unmarked form, the rule. Anything else that is more or less than the expected amount of politeness is a marked form and generates implicatures. The polite force of an utterance increases through the accumulation of politeness features like markers, indirect forms, hedges, hyperbole, etc. Which of these features the expected minimum consists of is socially and culturally determined and depends on the context. For example, no matter what the appropriate form for thanking is, e.g. 'thanks', 'thank you', 'thank you very much', 'I'm really grateful to you for X', 'I want to thank you for X', 'I'm indebted to you for X', whether thanking is the thing the speaker is expected to do in the first place, depends on the identity of the speaker and the hearer, the relationship between them, the thing the speaker is thanking the hearer for, whether the hearer had to do X or not, whether s/he was asked to do it or not, what the cost of X was for the hearer, etc., to name only a few of the features of the context. However, and this is, I think, a point that needs to be stressed, politeness is not just the result of choice of form but also of content. Implicatures can be generated when a speaker performs an act that was not expected – linguistic or not. So an unexpected act of thanking, apologising, complimenting, etc., is noticed and can therefore produce an extra message, even if it is delivered in a minimal form.

The next issue I want to discuss is what the position of politeness can be within the Gricean framework. Here I address the three questions introduced in § 2.1.

### **3. Politeness in the Gricean model**

#### *3.1 Maxim of Politeness*

My proposal is to expand the model through a Maxim of Politeness, which would cover both polite form and polite content (cf. p. 20). I insist on integrating politeness as a maxim and not as a separate principle, as Leech proposes, because the notion of cooperation (Grice's CP) has a validity that politeness lacks, as much as it may be expected or valued.

The cooperative principle (CP) (Grice 1967/1989: 26) is defined as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

In particular the CP consists of four maxims:

- i) Maxim of Quantity
  1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
  2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- ii) Maxim of Quality
  1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
  2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- iii) Maxim of Relation
  1. Be relevant.
- iv) Maxim of Manner
 

Be perspicuous.

  1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
  2. Avoid ambiguity.
  3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
  4. Be orderly.

Participants in conversation presume that their coparticipants are behaving cooperatively. If, however, this is not the case, i.e. if an addressee has reason to believe that the speaker may be lying, then communication breaks down since there can be no trust between participants. Moreover, when the CP is not observed in interaction and participants do not suspect this is the case, people are misled (if their coparticipants fail to observe the Maxim of Quality and thus lie) or frustrated (if the participants talk too much and are being irrelevant, i.e. fail to observe the Maxims of Manner, Quantity and Relation, as in (8)):

- (8) Insp. Clouseau: Does your dog bite?  
 Hotel Clerk: No.  
 Insp. Clouseau (bowing down to pet the dog): Nice doggie.  
 (The dog barks and bites Clouseau in the hand)  
 Insp. Clouseau: I thought you said your dog did not bite!  
 Hotel Clerk: That is not my dog.  
 (from *The Pink Panther Strikes Again*, 1973)

The hotel clerk is being uncooperative here: he gives Clouseau irrelevant information, since it is clear that with ‘your dog’ Clouseau is referring to the dog present, which he assumes (inaccurately) to be the clerk’s dog.

Generally, the results of the non-observance of the CP are breakdowns in communication, frustration and a feeling of insecurity, when the parti-

participants are not sure they understand what their coparticipants want to say. In none of these cases does an implicature, an extra message, arise.

Similarly, a participant may feel frustrated and communication may break down if politeness is not observed. As Leech puts it, 'unless you are polite to your neighbour, the channel of communication between you will break down, and you will no longer be able to borrow his mower' (Leech 1983: 82).

The result in this case is again a breakdown of communication, but in the social aspect of communication and not the rational, as is the case with the CP. People are frustrated not because they cannot understand what they are being told, but because they are hurt and feel they are not being respected. Here the non-observance generates an implicature, something like 'I don't respect/like you'. Both being cooperative and being polite promote interaction, but they operate at different levels. For this reason I am in favour of analysing politeness as a maxim of the CP and not as a separate principle.

My first argument for this analysis is, in contrast to Leech, that being polite is in most cases part of being cooperative. Leech claims that in being polite one is often faced with a clash between the CP and the PP so that one has to choose how far to 'trade off' one against the other; but in being ironic, one exploits the PP in order to uphold, at a remoter level, the CP. (9) is for Leech a case of an uncooperative utterance motivated through politeness. In (10), B is being ironic, which for Leech is a solution to the dilemma of which of the two principles (the CP or the PP) to follow.

- (9) A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we?  
B: Well, we'll all miss BILL.  
(Leech 1983: 80)

- (10) A: Geoff has just borrowed your car.  
B: Well, I like THAT.  
+ > What B says is polite to Geoff and is clearly not true.  
Therefore what B really means is impolite to Geoff and true.  
(Leech 1983: 83)

I do not consider either of these examples to be uncooperative since it is clear in (9) that B will not miss Agatha and in (10) that B hates the fact that Geoff has borrowed his car. (Cf. (8) above, which is an example of an uncooperative contribution.) (9) is a typical case of a clash between two maxims, Quantity and Politeness, (10) is a flouting of Quality, a typical example of irony. (Cf. also the clash of Relation and Politeness

in [13] below.) These examples strengthen the argument for giving politeness the status of a maxim rather than of a principle.

In my opinion the only possible conflict between the CP and being polite is the case of white lies, when a speaker is lying (i. e. fails to observe the Maxim of Quality and thus the CP) because he wants to protect the addressee's feelings, e. g. (11) when the speaker does not believe that the addressee's house is lovely.

(11) Your house is lovely!

However, I do not consider this utterance to be uncooperative, even if it is false, because the important part of the utterance meaning is in this case not the semantic content but the implicature 'I cherish the things you possess'.

A somewhat less clear case is when a speaker is lying not about feelings or impressions but about facts, as in (12):

(12) Jim has been invited to Mary's birthday party and knows that John hasn't. Jim meets John, who knows about the party. John asks Jim whether Mary has invited him. Jim wants to spare John's feelings and says:

Jim: No, I haven't been invited.

Jim's utterance misleads John and is therefore uncooperative, but note that in this case, unlike (11), politeness is just a motivation for the speaker to lie, it is not a message: no implicature 'I like you, I empathise with you' arises. In fact, this is not really a typical example of politeness. So there is no difference, as far as Grice's model is concerned, between this type of lie and other lies.

To sum up, there is no real conflict between being cooperative and being polite. Being polite promotes interaction and helps all participants reach their interactional goals (which are as important as the transactional goals) and reach their transactional goals more smoothly. There may sometimes be clashes between the Maxim of Politeness and one of Grice's four maxims (Quantity as in [9], Quality as in [11] or Relation as in [13]), but it is up to the speaker to choose which maxim to sacrifice.

(13) A: So what do you think of my new haircut?  
 B: Did you see the Blue Jays game last night?  
 (from Kingwell 1993: 387)

We can actually see politeness as part of being cooperative if we add a social dimension to Grice's rational cooperation. In fact, it has even been



claimed (Kingwell 1993) that being polite is the rational thing to do in communication. Appealing as this claim may seem at first, it includes the danger of characterising any instance of communication devoid of any politeness features as irrational, which is not the case.

This brings us to the second argument in favour of treating politeness as a maxim rather than a principle: there is a difference of status. Cooperation is presumed, taken for granted, whereas politeness is just expected, wished for. Politeness cannot be taken for granted the same way cooperation is taken for granted. We have seen that some instances of politeness are expected (which is weaker than ‘presumed’) but then again if they do not occur, communication (transmission of messages, intentions) still takes place.

The third argument is that when single maxims of the CP are flouted, cooperation is maintained. One can flout Quality, Quantity, etc., and still be cooperative by conveying the intended message indirectly. As Brown and Levinson (1987: 5) point out, ‘the assumption of cooperative behaviour is actually hard to undermine: tokens of apparent incooperative behaviour tend to get interpreted as in fact cooperative at a “deeper level”’. When single maxims of Leech’s PP are flouted, however, politeness disappears completely. These arguments lead us to the conclusion that politeness and cooperation do not have the same status. Politeness is part of being cooperative in a similar way as Quality and Relation are.

The next question that arises is what the content of this maxim is. ‘Be polite’, Grice’s suggestion, is vague and, since I have argued for a three-fold distinction of polite utterances, inadequate. Following Grice’s phrasing of his maxims, I propose the following formulation:

#### Maxim of Politeness

Be appropriately polite (i. e. politic in Watts’ sense) in form (choice of how) and content (choice of what).

- Submaxim 1: Do not be more polite than expected.
- Submaxim 2: Do not be less polite than expected.

The first submaxim may seem strange at first sight, but remember that maxims can be flouted and in this way can give rise to implicatures, which is exactly what I claim for marked polite utterances. A Maxim of Politeness formulated like this is a more sound basis for the generation of politeness implicatures than Leech’s Politeness Principle. The rule is not to be as polite as possible (to ‘maximize polite beliefs’ or as little impolite as possible (to ‘minimize impolite beliefs’), but to be as polite as is required ‘by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange

in which you are engaged.’ Any contribution that fails to meet this standard (either because it is less or more) gives rise to politeness implicatures.

### 3.2 *The implicature generated*

The next thing to be discussed is what exactly the content of the implicatures that are generated on the basis of the Maxim of Politeness is. Before we go into that, we should have a look at how implicatures are generated in the first place. According to Grice (1967/1989: 32 ff.), implicatures arise when a) no maxim is violated; b) a maxim is violated but its violation is to be explained by the supposition of a clash with another maxim (cf. § 3.1 above); or c) a maxim is flouted, i.e. it appears to be violated at the level of what is said, but the hearer still assumes that the speaker is being cooperative. Let me start the discussion of politeness implicatures with this last case, flouting, the most frequently discussed one.

In (14b) the speaker flouts the first submaxim, i.e. is more polite than expected (when in the given situation the expected form would be (14a)), and so s/he implicates ‘I don’t want to impose on you’.

- (14) (The speaker and the hearer are neighbours; the speaker occasionally borrows the hearer’s car.)
- a. Can I borrow your car tonight?
  - b. I was wondering if I could borrow your car tonight – if you don’t need it, that is.

Other possible implicatures generated by polite utterances could be: ‘I share your feelings’, ‘I like you’, ‘I am a nice guy’, ‘I respect you’, ‘We belong to the same group’, etc., or indeed any other messages that express solidarity, sympathy, respect, etc. towards the hearer and/or his/her belongings. What should be excluded as a possible implicature that can arise through flouting is ‘I am being polite’. This would mean that the speaker wants the hearer to think that the speaker does not mean what he says, that he is insincere.<sup>12</sup> If a hearer thinks that the speaker does not really mean what he says, this is an inference the hearer draws without the speaker’s intending to convey it. (Cf. the inference–implicature distinction made in § 2.1.)

This is the reason why an implicature like ‘I’m a nice guy’, which I took over from Meier (1995), should be treated carefully. Under no circumstances should it be understood as ‘I’m just being nice, I don’t mean what I’m saying’; it should be understood as ‘I mean well, I have good intentions’.

However, if a speaker is more polite than expected, s/he may also generate negative implicatures in a given situation. Lakoff (1973: 302) discusses how the occurrence of the more polite (15b), when (15a) is expected (because it has been previously employed by the participants), leads the addressee to the assumption that they are 'no longer in a state of camaraderie'.

- (15) a. Shut the window.  
b. Please shut the window.

Moreover, this first submaxim accounts for ironic polite forms like (16) and (17).

- (16) (The speaker and his wife have driven a long way and are both very hungry. However, the wife keeps refusing to stop at the diners they pass, because she thinks they look too down market.)

Husband: What was the matter with the 'Elite Diner', milady?  
(James Thurber, *A Couple of Hamburgers* 1963, quoted in Thomas 1995: 153)  
+ > You are being too pretentious and I hate it.

- (17) (The participants are again husband and wife; they are getting more and more irritated with each other.)

Wife: Will you be kind enough to tell me what time it is?  
(And later.)

Wife: If you'll be kind enough to speed up a little.  
(James Thurber, *A Couple of Hamburgers* 1963, quoted in Thomas 1995: 156)  
+ > I'm cross with you.

These are similarly cases of using a more than appropriately polite form, and doing so conveys extra messages. What the extra message is in every situation can be calculated successfully by the hearer on the basis of his/her knowledge of the world, the specific situation, the speaker, etc.

Possible implicatures that arise through the flouting of the second submaxim, i. e. when one is less polite than expected, are: 'I don't respect you', 'I dislike you', 'I don't esteem you', 'I'm angry with you', 'You are getting on my nerves', etc. In (18) the less polite refusal (18b) implicates a negative attitude towards the first speaker.

- (18) A: Would you like to come to the cinema with me tonight?  
B: a. I'm afraid I've planned something else. Perhaps another time.  
b. No. I've got better things to do.

Again, the flouting of this second submaxim can also have positive implicatures. Watts (1992: 67 f.), in a discussion of talk exchanges between a moderator of a radio phone-in programme and a caller, shows how the use of a form that is less polite than appropriate (the term of endearment ‘me love’) ‘signals a narrowing of social distance’ (ibid: 68) and so implicates solidarity.

Implicatures are generated not only through flouting but also through the observance of maxims (Levinson [1983: 104] calls them *standard implicatures*.) In this case this means that even when speakers are appropriately polite implicatures can arise. This may seem at first to be in contrast with the accepted claim that unmarked politeness remains unnoticed. However, a look at some cases of standard implicatures will show, I hope, that this is not the case. (Cf. [19]–[21] taken from Levinson [1983: 105 ff.].)

(19) Standard Implicature based on the Maxim of Quality

- a. John has two PhDs.  
+ > I believe he has, and have adequate evidence that he has.
- b. Does your farm contain 400 acres?  
+ > I don’t know that it does, and I want to know if it does.

(20) Standard Implicature based on the Maxim of Quantity

- Nigel has fourteen children.  
+ > no more than fourteen

(21) Standard Implicature based on the Maxim of Relation

- Pass the salt!  
+ > Pass the salt now.

In my opinion, these standard implicatures are background messages. Most of the time, when we hear a statement like (19a), we are not aware of the implicature that the speaker believes what he is saying, or when we hear a question like (19b), we do not consciously process the message ‘the speaker wants to know ...’. Similarly, when we hear an appropriately polite utterance, we do not notice the politeness message, but this does not mean that it is not there. Moreover, in the cases where implicatures are generated through the observance (rather than flouting) of the Maxim of Politeness, a very frequent implicature is ‘I am being polite’. Again this is not to be understood as ‘I’m being insincere, I’m trying to deceive you’, but as ‘I’m following the rules’. So we can claim that every appropriately polite form (i. e. every appropriate pragmatic strategy or

illocutionary act in a certain context) conveys that the speaker is behaving according to the rules.

All the instances of implicatures I have discussed so far have been conversational implicatures. Levinson (1983: 128 f.) has proposed that social deictic items like terms of address (*sir, madam, your honour*, etc.) and personal pronouns (*tu* vs. *vous*) express the social relationship between speaker and addressee by way of *conventional* implicature (i. e. 'non-truth conditional inferences that are not derived from superordinate pragmatic principles like the maxims but are simply attached by convention to particular lexical items or expression' (Levinson 1983: 127), 'frozen conversational implicatures' (Brown and Levinson 1987: 23)).

So it seems that the Maxim of Politeness, similar to Grice's four maxims, gives rise to all the different types of implicature (conventional and conversational; standard implicatures [generated through the observance of maxims], implicatures generated through flouting and implicatures generated through a clash between two maxims).

One last question that needs to be answered is whether we need the Maxim of Politeness for the generation of these implicatures or whether we cannot claim that they are generated by means of the other maxims. Since politeness implicatures are so variant and I have insisted in excluding 'I am being polite' from possible politeness implicatures (at least when a maxim is flouted), why do they need to be linked to an extra maxim and cannot be generated on the basis of the other four? For example, the form part of the Maxim of Politeness ('be appropriately polite in form') could be seen as a part of the Maxim of Manner. The advantage of the Maxim of Politeness is that we can account for multiple implicatures generated by the same utterance in the same situation. An utterance can give rise to more than one implicature, not all of them equally prominent (or relevant, in Sperber and Wilson's sense). Consider again examples (9) and (13), repeated here:

- (9) A: We'll all miss Bill and Agatha, won't we?  
B: Well, we'll all miss BILL.
- (13) A: So what do you think of my new haircut?  
B: Did you see the Blue Jays game last night?

In (9) B's utterance generates both a Quantity implicature 'We won't miss one of the people mentioned, Agatha' and a Politeness implicature 'I don't want to hurt your feelings' (depending on whether part of the context is that B knows that A likes Agatha). In (13), B generates both a Relevance implicature 'Let's talk about something else' and a Politeness

implicature ‘I don’t want to hurt your feelings’. Unless we add the Maxim of Politeness to the other four, we will not be able to account for these politeness implicatures.

#### **4. Advantages of the implicature analysis of politeness**

Summing up, the implicature approach has the following advantages:

- It gives us the means to distinguish between politeness as a message intentionally conveyed by the speaker (the expression of a positive attitude towards the hearer) and politeness as an inference drawn by the hearer (the belief that the speaker is not being sincere, etc.). These are two different expressions of politeness that cannot be captured if we view politeness as a strategy for achieving our goals.
- Both strategic and communicative uses of politeness can be seen as implicatures. The difference is that the implicatures conveyed by the expected (appropriate) strategies (i. e. that are generated through observance of the Maxim of Politeness) are standard and constitute background messages. The implicatures generated by flouting the Maxim of Politeness are more context dependent and often constitute the primary message the speaker wants to convey (a message related to an interactional rather than a transactional goal of the speaker).
- The implicature approach captures a variety of messages: Messages favourable for the speaker (‘I mean well’), favourable to the hearer (e. g. ‘I empathise with you’), messages regarding the social competence of the speaker (‘I’m following the rules’), ironic uses of polite forms, etc. The combination of different messages is also possible since implicatures are non-determinate.
- Since the same utterance can have different implicatures depending on the context in which it occurs, we can explain how the same utterance can be an instance of politic behaviour (it is expected and therefore can pass unnoticed) and of polite behaviour (unexpected and therefore marked) in different situations. For instance ‘It was delicious’ is politic as the answer to the question ‘How did you like dinner?’ (asked by the cook) and polite (carrying some polite implicature) when it has not been asked for. Again, prosodic and non-linguistic features can add to the utterance so that it crosses the line from politic to polite (wherever this line may lie).
- Politeness implicatures do or do not arise independent of whether the semantic content is true or not. The speaker may be misleading the hearer (lying) but he is not uncooperative.

## 5. Conclusion

I have argued that politeness is an important part of being cooperative in communication and therefore it can be incorporated in Grice's theory as a maxim (and not as a principle in conflict with the Cooperative Principle, as Leech proposed). The Maxim of Politeness expresses the existing expectation for an appropriate degree of politeness in the form and content of an utterance. Like Grice's other four maxims, it can be observed or flouted and in either case give rise to implicatures. The implicature generated when the maxim is observed is a standard implicature, a weak background message like 'I am following the rules'. When the maxim is flouted, on the other hand, a greater variety of implicatures can arise, expressing the speaker's either positive (in the case of politeness) or negative (in the case of rudeness) attitude towards the hearer. These implicatures often constitute the primary message of the utterance.

The Implicature Approach thus offers a comprehensive account of politeness since it can account for its different instances: politeness as the appropriate thing to do in communication, politeness as a strategy to achieve smooth interaction and politeness as an individual contribution conveying feelings and attitudes.

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## Notes

1. I would like to thank Prof. Dr. H. B. Drubig, Dr. Elsa Lattey, Dr. Luis López and the two *Multilingua* reviewers for their comments.
2. Actually, Haverkate's classification of speech acts according to how polite they are is divided at two levels: First he distinguishes between polite and non-polite speech acts. Then he goes on to split the category of non-polite into impolite and non-impolite. So, at the end we have a threefold distinction: polite (positive) non-impolite (neutral) and impolite (negative).
3. Lakoff proposed in an earlier paper the following rules of politeness: 1. Don't impose; 2. Give options; 3. Make A feel good – be friendly (Lakoff 1973: 298)
4. Cf. here Watts' (1992) polite/politic distinction discussed below.
5. Short FTAs, speech acts that threaten either participant's face. The notion of face is central in Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness; it is 'the public self image that every member wants to claim for himself' (Brown and Levinson 1978: 66) and consists of negative face, 'the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeded by others' and positive face, 'the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others' (ibid: 67).
6. + > = implicates that
7. For criticism of Leech's theory also cf. Fraser (1990) and Brown and Levinson (1987).
8. The term *relevance* is used in the sense of Relevance Theory: the less the processing effort needed and the greater the cognitive effect an utterance has, the greater is the relevance of an utterance. (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1995: 123 ff.)

9. For the significance of cognitive effects in Relevance Theory cf. also Jary's approach below.
10. Ostensive-inferential communication is defined by Sperber and Wilson as follows: 'The communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions I' (1995: 155).
11. The cognitive environment of an individual is 'a set of facts that are manifest to him' (Sperber and Wilson 1995).
12. But cf. 'I am being polite' as a standard implicature, meaning 'I am following the rules' (p. 23).

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