

## Revisiting Politeness Expressions in English

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### Abstract

*This paper revisits politeness expressions in English, exploring their linguistic characteristics and the underlying social dynamics they reflect. Grounded in pragmatic theories, politeness is examined as a phenomenon shaped by societal norms, wherein language users navigate the delicate balance between efficiency and maintaining positive social interactions. Through an analysis of various linguistic devices such as modal auxiliary verbs, progressive and past tenses, depersonalization, and the use of hedges, the study elucidates how speakers endeavor to mitigate potential burdens on listeners and foster smoother communication. By understanding and employing these linguistic strategies, English learners can better navigate the nuances of politeness expressions in the English cultural context. This exploration underscores the pivotal role of politeness in interpersonal communication and highlights its significance in facilitating effective interaction among language users.*

**Keywords:** Politeness expressions, Consideration for the listener, Burden on the listener, Speaker's linguistic consideration, Politeness

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humans are inherently social beings, and the trait that distinguishes human social interaction from that of other animals lies in its reliance on the medium of language. Language serves as both an internal tool for human perception and reasoning and an external means for negotiating interactions among individuals. Thus, language, as the most universal and fundamental medium facilitating higher-level communication among humans, inherently reflects the social nature of human interaction. Politeness expressions exemplify one aspect of the sociality inherent in language.

Politeness is a concept proposed by sociolinguists, particularly those adhering to pragmatic theories, viewing language use from the perspective of social interaction among community members and the resulting societal norms. It suggests that language users, while aiming to maximize efficiency and economy in conveying the combined meaning of propositional and intended meanings during communication, also feel the need for politeness, which involves considering the face of the communication partner and adjusting the expression of meaning accordingly [1, 2, 3]. Additionally, ensuring the maximization of the interlocutor's face through the use of polite language strategies, to achieve the common goal of rational and smooth communication among members of a linguistic community, is another fundamental principle of language use [4]. All language users possess a basic desire to be recognized positively within their linguistic community, thereby maintaining a sense of face, which influences language usage patterns.

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Expressing politeness appropriately in the interaction between speakers and listeners is a universal phenomenon, reflecting the basic human desire to foster consideration and good interpersonal relationships. However, the linguistic devices employed in such polite expressions may vary according to the cultural characteristics [5, 6]. This paper aims to examine the linguistic characteristics of politeness expressions in the English cultural context and reconsider them through various previous studies on politeness expressions. Through this exploration, we, as English learners, can gain a better understanding and acquisition of polite expressions in the English cultural context.

## 2. ESSENCE AND EXPRESSION PROCESS OF POLITENESS

In human communication contexts, Leech discusses two facets of politeness: positive face, characterized by acknowledgment from others, and negative face, which entails the respect for individual freedom and rights [5]. Brown and Levinson delineate politeness in terms of positive and negative face, while Scollon & Scollon and Arundale frame it in terms of involvement and independence and combination and separation, respectively [4, 7, 8]. However, criticism has been directed at these studies for grounding their foundational assumptions solely in superficial notions of everyday life and for being overly confined to the traditions of the English-speaking world, thereby failing to adequately explain politeness phenomena across various languages.

All material and spiritual entities in the world exist interdependently yet independently, amidst the conflict and struggle between the paradoxical tension of shared and independent domains. Humans constantly provoke conflicts through the encroachment of individual territories while simultaneously existing socially through the sharing of domains. Consequently, politeness arises from the recognition of the independence of others and the shared nature of interactions, with independence signified by distancing and sharing by proximating. Moreover, independence implies aversion to sharing, while sharing implies encroachment on independence, thus constituting a contradiction. From the perspective of politeness, proximating encompasses both the intimacy of sharing and the infringement of independence, while distancing involves both the deference of respecting independence and the aversion of sharing. Proximating and distancing imply a distance between interlocutors, as perceived through linguistic expressions [9, 10].

In this discussion, the essence of politeness can be explained as the process by which new attributes are expressed through the evaluation of the speaker's linguistic acts by the listener within the framework of a shared communicative model. In other words, polite language expressions serve as a means of controlling potential encroachments among interaction participants and minimizing domain violations through language expression [4, 11]. Furthermore, politeness is inherent throughout the entire conversation and not solely embedded within linguistic markers. Speakers project their desired face and expectations onto their utterances, while listeners construct interpretations of these utterances, thereby evaluating the speaker's politeness. Thus, politeness can be considered a co-constructed and expressed phenomenon among participants in the interaction [12, 13].

## 3. LANGUAGE CHARACTERISTICS OF ENGLISH POLITENESS EXPRESSIONS

### 3.1 Use of Auxiliary Verbs

The use of modal auxiliary verbs provides a means of leaving room for the recipient to decline a request, reflecting the speaker's attitude of mitigating meaning by expressing directives in a straightforward and factual manner so as not to offend the recipient's emotions [14, 15, 16].

#### 3.1.1 will/would

While "will" is used for directives, requests, and commands, it carries less forcefulness than imperatives. "Would," on the other hand, represents a more polite form of directive or command compared to "will."

- (1) Step into my office for a second.
- (2) Will/Would you step into my office for a second?

When used as a request for assistance, "would" becomes a more polite expression compared to "will."

(3) Would you do me a favor?

### 3.1.2 can/could

When "can" is used with the subject "you," it functions as a request for assistance, indicating politeness by implying uncertainty about whether the recipient can help.

(4) Can you help me?

"Can" is employed with subjects "I" and "you" for straightforward or direct requests or seeking permission.

(5) Can I make a quick telephone call?

When "could" is used in imperatives or commands, it becomes a more polite expression than "would," and when used in polite requests, it is more courteous than "can."

(6) Could you show me your ticket?

### 3.1.3 may/might

"May" and "might" are expressions used for more formal requests compared to "can" and "could." While "may" and "might" are sometimes used as more polite expressions for making requests than "can" and "could," requests beginning with "might" are rarely used nowadays.

(7) May I ask you a favor?

## 3.2 Use of Progressive and Past Tenses

The use of the progressive tense indicates a more incomplete and uncertain state compared to non-progressive sentences [14, 15].

(8) We are hoping you can explain this mess.

The past tense can be used to express current intentions or psychological states, with the tense reflecting the speaker's tentative attitude by presenting situations in the past to maintain a certain level of distance, provided there is no change in meaning when replaced with the present tense [14, 15].

(9) I wanted to ask you a favor.

(10) Did you want to see me now?

The combination of the past tense and progressive tense in past progressives signifies a higher degree of politeness. If the content is uncomfortable, it becomes the past progressive tense, whereas for proposals beneficial to the listener, the simple present tense is appropriate [14, 15].

(11) I was hoping you would take care of the kids for us.

(12) I was wondering if he could give us some money.

## 3.3 Depersonalization of Speaker and Addressee

Avoiding direct mention of the speaker or addressee and focusing the utterance on the action itself depersonalizes the speech act, omitting the subject (notional subject) or nominalizing it [14, 15].

- (13) It would be desirable to go our separate way.
- (14) It would be appreciated if...
- (15) It is our regret that...

### 3.4 Use of Hedges

Hedges refer to expressions that weaken or strengthen the content of propositions. Hedges used in polite expressions mainly serve to soften the force of the utterance, considering the recipient's face, and create expressions that show restraint and hesitation. Hedges are expressions that mitigate the speaker's assertive power, considering them as impositions on the listener, thereby reducing the speaker's intervention in the utterance [14, 15].

- (16) I think it's time we have to go.
- (17) John is a little abrupt with people, if I may say so.
- (18) It's rather dirty.

## 4. POLITENESS AS LISTENER'S EVALUATION OF SPEAKER'S SPEECH ACTS

The linguistic characteristics of English politeness expressions can be elucidated within the framework of politeness manifested in communication. Human beings harbor their own desires for both independence and sharing. However, linguistic acts expressed by one participant in communication, the speaker, may be perceived as burdensome to the independence of another participant, the listener. While the speaker can anticipate that such linguistic acts may impose results on the listener, they might also consider silence, the most ideal form of consideration for the other, as a means. However, in examining the significance of communication as a process of conveying one's desires to another individual, silence cannot be deemed an ideal method. Instead, the speaker may opt to mitigate the potential burden on the listener by acknowledging the possibility that their linguistic expressions may be burdensome and selecting means, albeit linguistic, to alleviate it. The listener, in turn, recognizes the speaker's linguistic efforts as consideration for the listener and perceives it as polite expression.

In the case of modal auxiliary verb usage discussed earlier, the speaker employs modal auxiliary verbs that convey appropriate modality to express their opinions or intentions, thus attempting to mitigate the burden on the listener. For instance, sentences like (2) employing modal auxiliary verbs 'will' and 'would' to convey the listener's willingness or decision represent linguistic expressions that are less burdensome to the listener's desire for independence compared to direct commands in sentence (1). Similar explanations can be provided for sentences (3) to (7) where modal auxiliary verbs are used. Without the use of modal auxiliary verbs, the expressions in sentences (3) to (7) would have conveyed burdensome content to the listener. However, by employing modal auxiliary verbs indicating appropriate modality, the speaker attempts to mitigate, linguistically, the burden of their intentions on the listener, and the listener interprets these efforts as politeness.

Next, let us consider the usage of the progressive and past tense. The progressive form of verbs is generally used to convey ongoing action while also indicating a temporary nature. As seen in example (8), linguistic expressions that add the meaning of temporariness may be understood as efforts by the speaker to linguistically reduce the burden on the listener, albeit to some extent. The listener perceives this as a polite expression. Similarly, the use of past tense by the speaker in examples (9) and (10) may be interpreted as efforts by the speaker to reduce the burden on the listener by distancing the present from the past, and the listener interprets this as a polite expression. Examples (11) and (12), where the past tense and progressive form are combined, illustrate a greater degree of politeness as they distance the present from the past and add the meaning of temporariness.

In the case of depersonalization of the speaker and listener, as seen in examples (13) to (15), the focus is shifted from the interpersonal relationship between the conversation participants to the action itself, potentially reducing the burden. This can be perceived as an effort by the speaker to minimize the burden, and the listener interprets it as polite expression.

Lastly, the use of hedges, as demonstrated in examples (16) to (18), serves to mitigate the force of the utterance content, thus showing consideration for the listener by the speaker's linguistic consideration. Therefore, expressions such as the insertion clause in example (16), the conditional clause 'if' in example (17), and the use of vocabulary conveying a nuanced meaning in example (18) ultimately operate as polite expressions towards the listener.

## 5. CONCLUSION

We explore the linguistic characteristics of English politeness expressions, elucidating them as linguistic efforts to control potential intrusions between participants in interaction and to consider the listener's face. Through the utilization of modal auxiliary verbs, the use of the progressive and past tenses, depersonalization of the speaker and listener, and the use of hedges, the speaker demonstrates an awareness of the potential burden of their utterances on the listener and endeavors to alleviate it linguistically.

Specifically, the use of modal auxiliary verbs to mitigate the force of utterance content aims to avoid giving the listener a sense of coercion or compulsion while employing the progressive or past tense seeks to lessen the burden on the listener. Additionally, depersonalization of the speaker and listener shifts the focus of utterances from interpersonal relationships to the action itself, revealing the speaker's intent to minimize the burden. Finally, the use of hedges to soften the content of utterances provides the listener with more polite and considerate expressions.

These research findings underscore the interaction between the speaker's communicative intent and the listener's evaluation of linguistic expressions, emphasizing politeness at the center of interaction. Therefore, English learners are expected to acquire proper politeness expressions by understanding and utilizing these linguistic characteristics.

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