

# Some Consideration on First-order and Second-order Politeness\*

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## Abstract

This paper tries to clarify what first-order and second-order politeness mean. I claim that some part of first-order politeness, not all, can become second-order politeness, when it has to do with pragmatics, and that first-order politeness and second-order politeness are sometimes overlapped. I also maintain that first-order politeness is not totally separated from scientific research, and that first-order politeness which can become second-order politeness is important in scientific research.

## 1. Introduction

Although politeness has been one of the central issues in the research of pragmatics in the past few decades, definitions of politeness remain problematic. This has been pointed out by some scholars (e.g., Thomas, 1995: 149; Spencer-Oatey, 2000: 2-3). Watts et al. (1992) have tried to clarify the notion of politeness by distinguishing first-order politeness from second-order politeness. By first-order politeness, they mean "... the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of sociocultural groups. It encompasses, in other words, commonsense notions of politeness" (Ibid.: 3). Second-order politeness "... is a theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage" (Ibid.: 3) and it is "a more technical notion that can only have a value within an overall theory of social interaction" (Ibid.: 4-5). Unfortunately, useful though their attempt at bringing some order to the field was, they did not at the time go further than expressing unease about the way in which the term was handled by scientific accounts.

While accepting the importance of making a distinction between the concept of politeness by lay people and that by scientists, I feel it is sometimes difficult to make a clear distinction between first-order and second-order politeness as defined by Watts et al. (1992). For example, I think Lakoff's (1973: 298) politeness rules (1. Don't impose. 2. Give options. 3. Make A feel good - be friendly.) can be applied to first-order politeness, as these can be observed in a daily life, although the rules fall into second-order politeness. Furthermore, Eelen (2001: 49) notes that "there is also a definite connection between her [Lakoff's] theory and politeness 1." Keeping these points in mind, I think that the meaning of first-order and second-order politeness needs to be reconsidered.

In Section 2, I will review Eelen's (2001; 2002) view on first-order and second-order politeness, which is the most innovative and gives us the new perspective, and in Section 3, I will state my view, taking

Eelen's (2001; 2002) and Watts et al.'s (1992) view into account.

## 2. Eelen's view

The most recent contribution on the first-order and second-order politeness has been provided by Eelen (2001: 32-43), who proposes three sub-divisions of first-order politeness: (1) expressive, (2) classificatory, and (3) metapragmatic.

Expressive politeness 1 refers to politeness encoded in speech, to instances where the speaker aims at 'polite' behaviour: the use of honorifics or terms of address in general, conventional formulaic expressions ('thank you', 'excuse me', ...), different request formats, apologies, etc. ..., i.e. the usual objects of investigation in most politeness research. Classificatory politeness 1 refers to politeness used as a categorizational tool: it covers hearers' judgements (in actual interaction) of other people's interactional behaviour as 'polite' or 'impolite'. ... metapragmatic politeness 1 covers instances of talk about politeness as a concept, about what people perceive politeness to be all about. (*Ibid.*: 35)

Eelen (*Ibid.*: 35-43) further refines first-order politeness, using such terms as (1) evaluativity, (2) argumentativity, (3) 'polite'-ness, (4) normativity and (5) modality and reflexivity. "As you can see, I have grouped the last two together here, because as you already remarked, indeed I do not consider them as of politeness that are of a fundamental and defining nature. ... modality just is too general to be of defining value for politeness – it really pertains to all of human (inter) action. And reflexivity is already present in the other aspects, so it should not really be considered a stand-alone characteristic either. Of the other four, only evaluativity, normativity and argumentativity now still seem to be essential characteristics to me. The status of 'polite'-ness seems highly questionable. I don't know if I would still include it in the list. But on the whole I have to add that in the end, such characteristics are purely analytical distinctions, and as such they depend on the purpose for which they are constructed." (Eelen, 2002)

From the above statement, it is clear that evaluativity is important in first-order politeness. This is also evident from classificatory politeness 1. Eelen (2001: 35) claims that "... the notions of politeness and impoliteness are used to characterize (other) people's behaviour, and to do so judgementally." Eelen (2002) further says that "For me the essence of politeness is that it contains an evaluation, and of course evaluation is most prominently present in classificatory politeness. One could well say that classificatory politeness is the primary locus of the evaluative aspect of politeness. But it is not only the locus: evaluativity is equally present in expressive and metapragmatic politeness, only there it is less immediately visible. In expressive politeness evaluativity is present in the form of self-evaluation and also in the form of the anticipation of the evaluations the hearer is expected to be making of Self. And in metapragmatic politeness evaluation is also present, but not in the form of direct evaluations, i.e., not in the form of a real evaluation-in-interaction where one specific person directly evaluates one specific

other person in the course of interaction, but rather in an indirect form, where the speaker evaluates (certain aspects of) ‘behaviour in general’, detached from any real Other or interactional situation.” Therefore, “... evaluativity and classificatory politeness are the most fundamental aspects of first-order politeness” (Eelen, 2002). Eelen (2002) further argues that “... evaluation/classification would also be considered fundamental aspects of ‘politeness’ by ordinary speakers themselves. ... people’s behavior is ‘evaluated’ in terms of propriety, and through such evaluations people can be ‘classified’ as being (im) polite, well or ill-mannered, etc.”

Eelen (2001: 252) suggests that first-order politeness should be the starting point of the scientific analysis, and that the characteristics of first-order politeness deserve to be examined more closely rather than being overlooked or side-lined. This is in line with my own view that first-order politeness should not be totally separated from scientific research.

Eelen (2001: 43-48) identifies three main characteristics of an adequate second-order politeness theory, derived from the characteristics of first-order politeness: (1) non-evaluativity, (2) non-normativity, and (3) a broad scope covering the whole of the continuum between polite and impolite. Eelen (Ibid.: 47) explains that unlike politeness 1, which is restricted to the polite end of the polite-impolite continuum, politeness 2 should cover the whole range of the continuum. This becomes possible when politeness 2 involves a non-evaluative and non-normative conceptualization.

Interesting points Eelen (2002) makes concerning the first- and second-order politeness distinction can be summarised as follows:

1. As a social phenomenon, there is only first-order politeness. Second-order politeness does not exist as a form of ‘politeness’. What I mean by this is that whenever we use the term ‘politeness’, this should always and only refer to a social phenomenon which the ordinary speakers involved (who are displaying the behavior) would also describe by the term ‘politeness’. As soon as this is no longer the case, we are not talking about ‘politeness’ anymore. To keep on using this term in our analyses can only lead to confusion. So whenever we as scientists describe a phenomenon not classified by ordinary speakers as ‘politeness’, then we should use a different term.
2. As regards the description of the social phenomenon (rather than the phenomenon itself), the distinction between first-order and second-order should also be made. So you can have first-order descriptions and second-order descriptions of any social phenomenon, including politeness. First-order descriptions are descriptions made by ‘ordinary speakers’, while second-order descriptions are made by scientists, within the specific context of scientific theorizing.
3. In order to avoid the awkwardness of having to talk about “first-order descriptions of first-order politeness”, “second-order descriptions of first-order politeness” and so on, we should carry through the point made under (1) to the full, and no longer speak of first-order and second-order politeness,

but only of 'politeness' tout court. This is possible if we acknowledge that as a social phenomenon, only first-order politeness deserves the descriptive term 'politeness'. So in the end, the first-order/second-order distinction would seem to be more about the phenomena themselves.

I agree with the first point concerning the terminology of politeness, but despite the needs to clarify "politeness", which was also stated in Section 1, I do not think this problem is solved yet. Some attempts have been made. Watts (1989), for example, suggested to use "politic behavior," which can be defined as "socio-culturally determined behavior 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" (Ibid.: 135). This was one attempt to avoid using the term, "politeness", but I wonder whether "politic behavior" is commonly recognised or used. The second point tells us that first-order and second-order can also be applied to other social phenomenon, not only to politeness. When Watts et al. (1992) suggested first-order and second-order politeness, we may not have thought of this point. I think the third point has not been made before and I think it should be taken note. I will consider his view as well as Watts et al.'s (1992) and state my own view on politeness in the next section.

### 3. My view

Watts et al. (1992) have tried to make an order in the definition of politeness and suggested to distinguish first-order from second-order politeness. Although I admit the importance of their claim, I do not think they have made clear what constitutes first-order or second-order politeness. They (1992: 4) have explained that second-order politeness is an "elevated" version of first-order politeness and that expressed the need to specify the two:

... in examining linguistic politeness we are dealing with a lay first-order concept which has been elevated to the status of a second-order concept within the framework of some more or less adequate theory of language usage. This being so, it is crucially important to state in what ways the two concepts differ, and this, as we have also seen, is rarely if ever done.

Eelen (2001) has attempted to define first-order and second-order politeness, as was reviewed in Section 2. Taking his definition and Watts et al.'s claim into account, I try to reconsider first-order and second-order politeness and try to meet the need which Watts et al. suggested above.

If we can agree on the idea that first-order politeness is to do with the lay people and second-order politeness is to do with scientists, we can come to the following assumption. What can be observed in a daily life and what the lay people consider to be polite or impolite are categorised as first-order politeness. Eelen (2001: 47) has claimed that the difference between first-order and second-order politeness is that the former includes only the polite end of the polite-impolite continuum and the latter includes both polite and impolite ends of it. However, the lay people also judge someone to be impolite,

therefore, I think the impolite end is also included in first-order politeness. Actually, classificatory politeness in first-order politeness proposed by Eelen (2001: 35) includes impolite judgements by the hearer.

I think that second-order politeness is based on first-order politeness. Eelen (2001: 32) states that most politeness research was conducted in the field of expressive politeness 1, which is a sub-category of first-order politeness.

My view concerning the first-order and second-order politeness distinction slightly differs from Eelen's. In a daily life, people use honorifics, address terms, or different request forms, etc. Some of these can be second-order politeness, when pragmatic research is conducted on these, i.e., some of expressive politeness 1, in Eelen's term, can become second-order politeness. However, there are some features in first-order politeness, which cannot become second-order politeness. In other words, I think there are some areas in first-order politeness which have little or nothing to do with second-order politeness. Let me try to clarify the two areas: (1) the area which only first-order politeness covers and (2) the area which both first-order and second-order politeness cover.

Polite expressions, such as honorifics and address terms, different strategies according to situations and good manners are all included in first-order politeness. It is important to include behaviour, not only linguistic expressions, when we talk about politeness, as I have already stated. In my opinion, to be nice to someone, to show consideration, to be appropriate are included in politeness. And people's evaluation on other people's behaviour is also included in politeness. When someone has said or done something which does not match the social/cultural norms or the hearer's expectation, s/he may be evaluated negatively, and consequently s/he is given some kind of sanctions. An example of sanctions is such a bad reputation as "S/he is not 'polite'." This is similar to *wakimae* which Ide (1989) proposed as an important or even prerogative aspect of Japanese culture, but I claim that *wakimae* applies to any culture (See chapter 2 of Fukushima, 2000).

Among the above specific areas in first-order politeness, there are some areas which second-order politeness does not include, in other words, the areas which only first-order politeness covers. What are those areas? The answer to this could be the areas which do not have to do with pragmatics, as we have assumed that second-order politeness is something scientists, i.e., pragmaticians, consider in the study of pragmatics. For example, good manners are included in first-order politeness, but not in second-order politeness, as manners are not in the realm of pragmatics. Honorifics (e.g., in Japanese), which is obligatory, has little to do with pragmatics, because the speaker has no choice (Thomas, 1995: 152), thus, I do not think it is included in second-order politeness.

As was seen in the above, although there are some areas which first-order and second-order politeness overlap, there are some areas in first-order politeness which second-order politeness does not include. Therefore, I would suggest making a distinction within first-order politeness. Then, what are the areas

which are also included in second-order politeness? Let me consider solicitousness (See chapter 3 of Fukushima, 2000) from this perspective. Solicitousness can be defined as preemptive responses to (1) circumstances or situations, (2) verbal cues or (3) nonverbal cues, which take the form of offering. An example of solicitousness is to switch on a fan when someone says, "It's hot in here." In a daily life, the lay people demonstrate solicitousness. The actor of solicitousness tries to be nice or to show consideration or to be of some help to the beneficiary. The beneficiary evaluates solicitousness, i.e., s/he appreciates it or takes it as officious. From this viewpoint, solicitousness can be classified as first-order politeness. However, since solicitousness is a possible response to off-record requests (when responding to a verbal cue), which are second-order politeness, it can be also classified as second-order politeness. Watts et al. (1992: 4) also state that "The pursuit of universals will necessarily involve us in second-order concepts, whereas the investigation into politeness in individual cultural frameworks will almost inevitably involve first-order concepts." In other words, it can be said that a cross-cultural study falls into the category of second-order politeness. I maintain that first-order politeness should not be separated from scientific research and that some areas of first-order and second-order politeness are closely related.

Figure 1 shows my idea on the relationship between first-order and second-order politeness. The big circle indicates the area of first-order politeness and the small circle indicates the area which is relevant to politeness research. In other words, the latter can become second-order politeness. Both areas are influenced by culture.

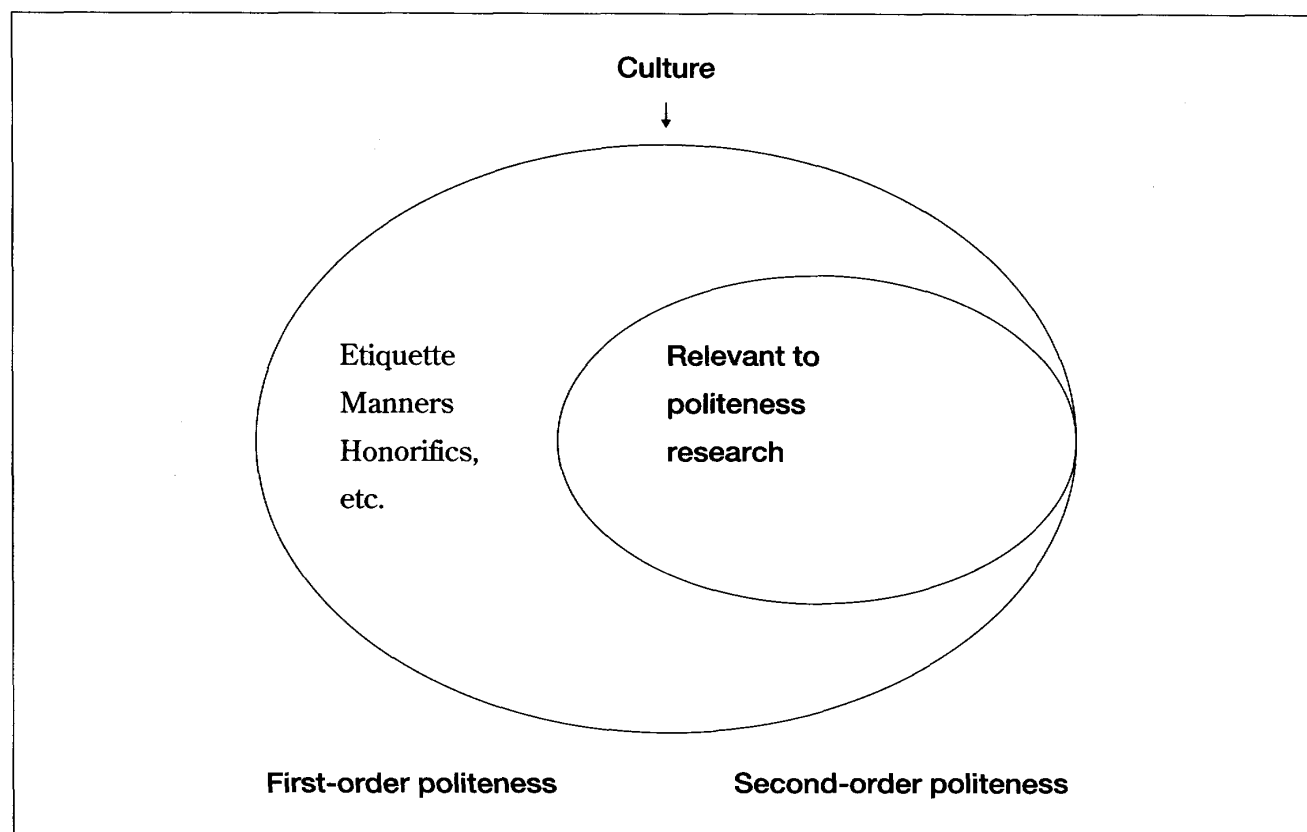


Figure 1. First-order and Second-order Politeness with respect to Politeness Research

This may relate to Eelen's (2002) first point reviewed in Section 2. Eelen's (1999) argument, i.e., the three ideologies of politeness, i.e., (1) commonsense ideology, (2) scientific ideology and (3) social ideology are closely interconnected, is also related to the above. Eelen (Ibid.: 164) notes that commonsense ideology corresponds to first-order politeness in Watts et al.'s (1992) term, and scientific ideology to second-order politeness. Eelen (Ibid.) states that social ideology refers to beliefs having to do with certain aspects of social organization or social structure and their associated values. I think culture encompasses social ideology.

Classificatory politeness in Eelen's (2002) term, i.e., the hearers' judgement, has been neglected in politeness research. I agree with this. Since politeness is determined not only by the speaker's utterances or behaviours but also by the hearer's judgement, politeness needs to be dealt with also from the hearer's side. From this perspective, I would like to consider hearers' judgement with regard to how people make an evaluation on people's behaviour and what influences people's evaluation. People do some kind of behaviour. There is a hearer or a receiver of that behaviour. When people's behaviour matches the hearer's or the receiver's expectation, which is influenced by cultural/social norms, the hearer/receiver would evaluate that behaviour as appropriate. Furthermore, appropriate behaviour will also be evaluated highly.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have given some attention to first-order and second-order politeness, as I feel there has not been enough discussion on them. I believe that some part of first-order politeness can become second-order politeness. For example, solicitousness can be classified both as first-order politeness and second-order politeness. I have suggested that some parts of first-order politeness are also relevant to academic research. I'm afraid the dispute over modeling politeness has not been settled yet. I hope this short paper will give people some suggestions when considering politeness.

\*This is a revised version of a part of a paper, "Solicitousness : Its Evaluation and Status" presented at the Colloquium, "First-order and second-order politeness: The dispute over 'modeling' politeness" at Sociolinguistics Symposium 14, held at University of Gent, Belgium on 5 April, 2002.

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