

UNIT 2 LANGUAGE ISSUES AND ORIGINAL & CRITICAL WRITING

Part (a)

Language Issues essay: politeness

Response 2

As it says in the extract from 'An A-Z of English Grammar', politeness is about respecting the feelings and wishes of other people. It is all about judging the purpose and context and understanding who we are speaking to. All speakers have many repertoires and can use these to make sure they don't offend. The extract gives examples of different ways you can use language to get things done. Transactional language can be quite direct as in the imperative "Close the door" or the exclamatory minor utterance "The door!". In some contexts, these would be seen as rude because of their directness. While they might be acceptable in domestic or social contexts where the participants are familiar, they could be seen as offensive or aggressive in more formal contexts like a work place. For instance, if a teacher used the noun phrase "The door!" it might be seen as frustration at having to repeatedly ask students to do the same act over and over. By adding an interjection like "Please" or by framing it as an interrogative with a modal verb ("can you close the door?") the request is less direct. This would be important in a context where the speaker wanted to make a good impression for instance as the extract suggests where you have to address important people or strangers. Modal verbs like "can" and "could" imply there is a choice even when there isn't and this makes it more polite. By using "could" we make an indirect question and this is always seen as more polite. David Crystal says another way to be indirect is to use the past tense instead of the present tense. Changing a question from "Do you want to go?" to "Did you want to go?" makes the choice more tentative and this is more polite. Adding an explanation like the simple utterance "It's rather cold." works in the same way because it explains why an act is needed. It makes the request more important because it reflects on the needs of the speaker and politeness theory would say that you need to respond the face needs of others.

Research suggests that women are more polite than men and Janet Holmes argues that they use language to create and maintain relationships while men are more likely to use language for communicating information and getting things done. This means that women are more likely to use compliments, less direct language and politeness features like the interjections please and thank you. They are also less likely to impose in informal conversation which means they accept shorter turns and interrupt less often.

Lynne Truss argues that politeness is all about social class and that we try to use appropriate language so we are accepted. Terms of address are a very important way of showing this. In a formal context it is polite to use honorifics like Mr to titles show respect. If you call someone by their first name when you don't really know them it creates a false sense of familiarity and this can be seen as rude. Vocatives reflect levels of politeness because naming someone in the appropriate way is important. In a formal context like addressing a stranger who has dropped their office identification card you could use the idiom "excuse me" which is a polite way to attract attention of someone you don't know. In a formal context like political interview you would use the appropriate honorific and the family name (Mr Cameron) or reference his role (Prime Minister Cameron), but if the interviewer called him "Dave" or a "Davey-boy" it would be disrespectful.

Kate Fox has done research that shows that British people are more likely to use interjections to be polite. In formal public contexts like in shops and on public transport British people say "please" and "thank you" more often than people in other countries. This is also true of the interjection "sorry" which British people say even if a person steps on their foot. Another sign of politeness in formal contexts is to talk about other-related topics like how someone's journey was, or self-related jokes before getting on to the real topic of the

discourse. Fox calls this “the polite procrastination rule”. It helps establish a relationship.

In discourse there are many features of spoken language that can help with politeness. Back channel affirmations like laughter or verbal agreement (“mm”, “yes”) give the speaker support and allow them to keep the floor. These are overlaps not interruptions so the speaker does not have to give up the turn. They are what Brown and Levinson would call positive politeness strategies because they help the speaker to feel accepted. Prosodic features like changes in volume can also affect the relationship between participants. We usually associate an increase in volume with anger and this could be a face threatening act.