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Book review

Politeness

J. Watts Richard, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. xiv + 304 pp. GBP 50 (Hb), 18.99 (Pb)

With this book, Richard Watts sets himself a tall order: to “introduce readers to the controversies in the field of linguistic politeness without . . . being uncritical, . . . [to] help the reader through the maze of research publications on the topic, but above all . . . [to] tackle the fundamental questions head-on: What is linguistic politeness? Is politeness theory a theory about a concept of politeness₂, or can it be formulated in such a way that it can shed light on the struggle over politeness₁?” (p. 12). However, this is more than an introductory textbook. It also aspires to provide “a serious, radical alternative to current theories on the market” (p. 250). In what follows, the book’s contribution is assessed in the light of this double proclamation (for further discussion of some of its main tenets, see [Terkourafi, 2005](#)).

Chapter 1 opens with an idea that remains central throughout the book: that politeness is a matter of subjective, situated evaluation. What people pick out as ‘polite behaviour’ differs from one person to the next and from one occasion to the next. Moreover, ‘polite behaviour’ may be positively or negatively evaluated (pp. 8–9). To tackle this chameleonic notion, Watts adopts two distinctions proposed in previous work by himself and others. The first one, that between ‘politeness1’ and ‘politeness2’ (p. 4), differentiates “‘folk’ interpretations of (im)politeness” from “(im)politeness as a concept in a sociolinguistic theory of (im)politeness” (cf. [Watts et al., 1992: 3](#); [Eelen, 2001: 76–78 et passim](#)). The second is the distinction between ‘politic’ and ‘polite’ behaviour—first proposed by [Watts \(1989\)](#)—where politic is that “linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be appropriate to the social constraints of the ongoing interaction, i.e., as non-salient” (p. 19). “Linguistic behaviour which is perceived to be beyond what is expectable, i.e., salient behaviour”, on the other hand, “should be called *polite* or *impolite* depending on whether the behaviour itself tends toward the negative or positive end of the spectrum of politeness” (p. 19; italics in the original).

Watts’s aim through these distinctions is to establish the impossibility of theorising about politeness₂ and to propose a theory of politeness₁ which is descriptive, non-normative, and, significantly, non-predictive (pp. 23–25; cf. [Eelen, 2001: 111](#)). To achieve this, first he seeks to establish that perceptions of politeness₁ are variable by showing that they are subject to change over time. Using English terms signifying ‘polite’ as a case

study, Chapter 2 illustrates how these went from denoting a natural attribute of a good character in the 16th century to signifying a social, acquired trait associated with the use of standard/prestigious language in the 19th century. This original—if somewhat Anglocentric (*pace* p. 45)—analysis introduces another central theme of the book, the association of politeness with power, wherein the reason for negative evaluations of politeness (pp. 8–9, 33) may also lie (although this is not stated in these terms). This is a theme which has been gaining attention in the recent literature, witness, e.g., Mills's (2003: 63–66) association of politeness with white middle-class feminine discourse in contemporary Britain. The selfsame historical relativity of politeness¹, nevertheless, makes it hard to assent unquestionably to some of the other claims made in this chapter, such as that “we can safely assume that [in western Europe] there were other linguistic means to refer to violations of and additions to politic behaviour” (p. 31), and, more to the point, that “polite behaviour is frequently viewed with suspicion as being socially divisive and elitist” (p. 33). While this may have been the case for post-Renaissance British society, the generalisation of these claims beyond these historical circumstances rather remains a desideratum for future research.

The following two chapters continue the attempt to establish politeness¹ as the only viable object of study, this time on theoretical grounds. In Chapter 3, a number of previous approaches are reviewed (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Arndt and Janney, 1985; Janney and Arndt, 1992; Fraser and Nolen, 1981; Fraser, 1990; Ide et al., 1992; Matsumoto, 1988, 1989) and found wanting on various counts, most importantly, focussing on the speaker rather than being discursive (p. 64; abolishing the speaker–hearer distinction is an interesting proposal made on p. 266 n. 8 but not further developed), and assuming cultural homogeneity, while not defining what culture is (pp. 76, 83). However, in view of this last criticism (most forcefully advanced by Eelen, 2001: 158–173), it is surprising that the author goes on to speak about “cultures” (p. 268 n. 14) as if this were an unproblematic notion. On the whole, it is concluded that these approaches must be rejected either because they are based on reified definitions of politeness¹ as politeness² (pp. 53, 63, 69, 83; cf. Eelen, 2001: 48–75), or because they represent accounts not of polite, but of *politic* behaviour (pp. 72, 80).

Summarising criticisms of Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) theory, Chapter 4 focuses on two further points, these authors' use of the sociological variables of Distance, Power and Ranking, and the central role of the notion of face in their theory. A proper assessment of their theory is nevertheless hampered by the absence of definitions of the three sociological variables, the lack of attention to the role of the formula yielding *W* in the theory—wherein specific strategies are not inherently polite (as stated on pp. 91, 92, 95) but are only polite if used according to the dictates of this formula—and the use of constructed examples to exemplify their strategies. This last point results in several instances where positive and negative strategies are confounded (e.g., examples 4, 5, 9, 15 on pp. 89–90), when citing either real-life examples or the authors' original examples—“nearly all” of which “came from naturally occurring tape-recorded speech” (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 11) *contra* p. 89—would have provided a more appropriate means of finding out how these utterances would have been evaluated had they “really been produced” (p. 91). A thorough presentation of Werkhofer's (1992) criticism of Brown and Levinson serves to introduce his proposed analogy of politeness

with money (taken up in Chapter 6), in terms of which the politic/polite distinction is now re-cast (p. 115).

Having located at the heart of previous approaches' shortcomings their equating politeness with facework, and their treating social structure as homogeneous, Chapter 5 takes the first step toward developing an alternative model in which politeness is dissociated from facework. In a revision of his earlier stance (Watts, 1989: 136; Watts, 1992: 69), the author seems to have taken on board recent critiques (e.g., Terkourafi, 2001: 12–13), and now acknowledges that all behaviour impacts on facework. Nevertheless, (what is explicitly categorised by participants as) politeness (i.e., politeness1) is only a subset of that behaviour (pp. 130, 135); hence, politeness1 cannot be equated with facework. This interesting suggestion could have profited from further elucidating the relationship between the four terms now at play, politic and polite behaviour, and aggressive and supportive facework (pp. 118–119, 140, and the diagram on p. 260). One possibility—supported also by the conjunction of 'facework' and 'politic' in the statement that "polite or impolite language is salient linguistic behaviour beyond the structures used in facework and politic behaviour" (p. 141)—is that facework, including both its aggressive and supportive aspects, is equated with politic behaviour, while some supportive facework is perceived as polite, and thus constitutes a subset of politic behaviour.

True to developing an alternative model of politeness1, Chapter 6 states that the aim of such a model is to "recognis[e] when a linguistic utterance *might* be open to interpretation as (im)polite", and, following such recognition, to "provide the means of assessing how lay participants . . . assess social behaviour that they have classified as (im)polite utterances as positive or negative" (p. 143; italics in the original). Against the background of Bourdieu's practice-based sociology of language, the author further develops *Werkhofer's* (1992) equation of politeness with money, suggesting that both politic and polite behaviour may be viewed as linguistic 'payment': "as long as the exchange proceeds within the framework of politic behaviour, the 'payment' will go largely unnoticed, but if it is not 'paid' it will almost certainly be noticed. Linguistic 'payment' in excess of what is required is open to interpretation as 'polite'" (p. 161). This is an original and interesting idea which is somewhat muted by the multitude of new terms introduced.

One such term is 'value'. Sentence-types can carry values (values = truth values? p. 154), but so can networks (values = ties? p. 154), and utterances (values = illocutionary forces? pp. 156, 209–210). On yet other occasions, the content of this term cannot be further clarified (pp. 162, 164), while references to values as countable ("every utterance bears at least one value", p. 209) run contrary to descriptions of value as a matter of degree ("the utterance reaches a level of relevance for the addressee, i.e., it has a certain value", p. 210). Another unclear term is 'network'. Initially (p. 154), this seems to be equivalent to the notion originally introduced by *Milroy* (1980). However, later on one can "close a part of the network" (pp. 159–160; cf. pp. 156, 165), the term now apparently indicating a series of conversational moves on a particular topic. Later still, "school, family, local and national government, . . . the church, financial institutions" are said to constitute "institutionalised latent networks" (p. 213), introducing a third potential sense of the term.

The introduction of new terms is accompanied by a proliferation of distinctions taken up from previous work. Thus, given that the distinction between 'latent' and 'emergent'

networks reiterates Bourdieu's distinction between the 'modus operandi' and the 'modus operandi' (p. 153; cf. Eelen, 2001: 148), it is not clear why this new distinction is needed. The same applies to the distinction between 'expressive' and 'classificatory' politeness1 (p. 162; cf. Eelen, 2001: 35 ff.), which is not further exploited, and the reduplication of content between 'facework' and 'relational work', respectively defined in the glossary as "*facework*: efforts made by the participants in verbal interaction to preserve their own face and the face of others" (p. 274) and "*relational work*: efforts made by the participants in verbal interaction to be as considerate towards one another as possible" (p. 277).

Chapter 7 is dedicated to identifying the linguistic characteristics (if any) of expressions open to interpretation as polite. ('If any' in the previous sentence refers to the author's repeated cautioning us that politeness1 is never inherent in linguistic expressions (pp. 140, 186, 198, 200); however, in view of this cautioning, the failure to cancel the 'polite meaning' of some expressions (pp. 192, 196 examples 94, 95) is difficult to accept without further justification). Three distinctions are proposed: 'ideational' is distinguished from 'interpersonal' meaning; 'propositional' from 'procedural' meaning; and 'grammaticalisation' from 'pragmaticalisation'. The author's suggestion may be summarised as the claim that politeness is achieved by pragmaticalised expressions of procedural meaning foregrounding the interpersonal component of meaning (pp. 175, 186). While this is an interesting suggestion, none of the distinctions in which it is couched is unproblematic.

'Ideational' meaning is wrongly equated with Grice's 'natural' meaning (p. 270 n. 1), whereas, unlike 'natural' meaning (Grice, 1989: 215), 'ideational' meaning relies crucially on convention (p. 173). The distinction between 'propositional' and 'procedural' meaning, on the other hand, while highly reminiscent of the relevance-theoretic distinction between 'conceptual' and 'procedural' meaning (Blakemore, 1987) is not discussed in those terms, and is somewhat confounded by the equation of 'propositional' with 'ideational' meaning (p. 174). Finally, statements such as that "some [linguistic forms] become fixed as structural elements in the language system itself (grammaticalisation), while others lose most or all of their propositional content and begin to function as metapragmatic 'signposts' or 'instructions' to the addressee on how to process propositions (pragmaticalisation)" fail to make an adequate case for distinguishing 'grammaticalisation' from 'pragmaticalisation', especially in the light of Nicolle's (1998) relevance-theoretic analysis of *grammaticalisation* as the emergence of *procedural* uses of an expression.

Chapter 8 places the proposed approach within the theoretical framework of Relevance Theory (RT). The reason for this choice of framework is what the author sees as the limitations posed by "the Gricean basis of Lakoff, Leech and Brown and Levinson" (p. 203) on those earlier treatments of politeness. However, it should be pointed out that the placement of these earlier theories vis-à-vis the Gricean Cooperative Principle is not quite as it is now presented. Specifically, contrary to what is stated on p. 203, they viewed polite behaviour as *departing* from the CP, *not* as a form of cooperation. Moreover, none of these approaches interpreted cooperation as mutually maintaining face as is stated on pp. 203, 206; rather, they saw "[p]oliteness principles [as] ... just such principled reasons for deviation [from the CP]" (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 5; see also Terkourafi, 2001: 110–120). RT is now preferred because it offers an alternative to the Gricean model rather than because of its inherent affinity with the current approach—an affinity that could have

been claimed, for instance, based on its being the hearer-based theory par excellence, and on its providing the background to the conceptual/procedural distinction parallel to the propositional/procedural distinction drawn in the previous chapter. As a result, the major question regarding politeness posed within RT to date, i.e., whether politeness is communicated as a separate message or not, is not tackled, and the only longer treatment of politeness within RT (Jary, 1998) is missing from this chapter, while other politeness-related suggestions within RT (e.g., Escandell-Vidal, 1996, 1998; Ruhi and Doğan, 2001) are completely ignored.

Nevertheless, even as an alternative to the Gricean model, RT is not done justice. It is criticised as not having defined ‘intention’ (p. 272 n. 6), despite Sperber and Wilson’s careful dissection of the Gricean notion into an ‘informative’ and a ‘communicative’ component (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/1995: 29–31 *et passim*). Similarly, the claim that “[RT] was not originally designed to track the chain of inferred assumptions” (p. 217) runs counter to RT claims of psychological plausibility (Wilson and Sperber, 2004: 275 ff.). Moreover, despite claims to the contrary (p. 217), none of the standard RT-tools (e.g., the explicit/implicit distinction, the notion of enrichment) are subsequently used in the analysis of examples in Chapter 9, which applies the proposed approach to two longer recorded extracts, one of confrontational discourse from a TV interview, and one of cooperative discourse from a radio phone-in programme. All this contributes to the impression that RT, and pragmatic theory in general, remain rather peripheral to the interests of the present book.

Chapter 10 adds a final criticism of earlier models focussing on politeness², namely that, on those models, being polite presupposes knowing when an act is an FTA. However, this is impossible to know in advance, since it depends on the hearer (p. 251). This point successfully supports the current author’s quest to develop a non-predictive theory of politeness¹, and how politeness¹ is positively or negatively evaluated (pp. 252–255). A diagram tying up facework, politic and polite behaviour is also proposed (p. 260). This, however, raises more questions than it answers. The oval shape indicating politic behaviour is contained within the larger oval of non-politic behaviour, thus apparently constituting a proper subset of it, while the whole is contained within an undefined a rectangle open to the left. “Aggressive facework” lying “on the boundaries of the expected politic behaviour” is “highly unlikely” to be “polite” (p. 259), although an “unnecessarily aggressive” utterance has just been dubbed “polite” on the previous page (p. 258).

Similar technical deficiencies not only deflect attention away from the interesting ideas put forward, but also compromise the book’s aim to function as an introductory textbook. Crucial terms are used several times before they are defined (e.g., *habitus*: used pp. 11, 76, 145, defined p. 149; (*face*-)*threat*: used p. 18, *face*: used pp. 76, 82, 85, 95, defined p. 101 (*facework*: defined p. 130 ff.)), or are inconsistently defined (e.g., TRP is first expanded to ‘turn relevance place’ in n. 3 of ch. 9 on p. 272 and then (correctly) to ‘transition relevance place’ on p. 279). Statements such as “will pragmatic well-formedness in language A exclude utterances which are pragmatically well-formed in language B if those same utterances in A are non well-formed?” (p. 61) create terminological confusion by apparently seeking *utterance* identity across languages. Terminological confusion is also created by references to “assertive, interrogative and imperative” as “the three sentence moods” (pp. 154, 174; ‘sentence types’ may have been a better choice, cf. Lyons, 1977:

747–748) “propositions contained in an utterance” (p. 154) rather than being ‘expressed by’ it, “individual words hav[ing] truth values” (p. 174) rather than pointing to ‘referents’, the addressee “mak[ing] implicatures” (p. 57) rather than ‘inferring’ them, and, within an RT-context, “mutual cognitive context” (p. 209) instead of ‘mutual cognitive environment’, and “shared knowledge” (pp. 209–210) instead of ‘mutual manifestness’.

The way various theories are presented is also hardly introductory. The introduction of the Gricean theory of implicature (p. 57) relies on notions such as “conventional denotative” vs. “connotative”, “truth-conditional”, and “propositional” meanings, as well as “illocutionary act” and “illocutionary force” which are not further explained. Contrary to Grice’s (1989: 215–223) concern with explicating non-natural meaning, emphasis is now placed on ‘natural’ meaning, wrongly described as “encoded by the linguistic structure of the utterance” (pp. 205, 270 n. 1). “Conventional” (rather than conversational) implicatures are discussed with respect to “explicit linguistic evidence of the flouting” of maxims (p. 206) and said to be attached to an utterance (p. 275) rather than to particular lexical items (Grice 1989: 25–26). Finally, the Gricean model is criticised for “ignor[ing] the possibility that an addressee might infer more than one implicature” (p. 111) *contra* Grice’s (1989: 40) acknowledging the indeterminacy of conversational implicatures, and for not providing “an explicit account of how implicatures are derived” (p. 208; cf. p. 111), something which is explicitly done within this model by Levinson (1983: 102 ff.).

An important drawback for an introductory textbook is the inconsistent referencing of works drawn upon, such that students may follow up the claims advanced. The ideas of Goffman (pp. 122–125), Grice (pp. 203–208), and Bourdieu (pp. 147–150) are all summarised without giving page numbers, or sometimes even dates of works referred to, occasionally also when citing original material (e.g., the citation from Lee-Wong on p. 120, and from Goffman on p. 124). Significantly, the work in which the equation on p. 150 (repeated on p. 256) originates (i.e., Bourdieu 1984: 101) is not even listed in the bibliography. Other interesting claims, such as the criticism of the individualistic vs. collectivist dichotomy (p. 267 n. 11) remain without bibliographical support. Searle’s (1969) seminal work on ‘Speech Acts’ is cited as published in 1970, while Searle (1971) is cited as published in 1972 (pp. 53, 295). Footnote 4 from Chapter 9 (p. 226) is missing, while referenced examples are wrongly numbered on p. 228. References to ‘Sifianou 1997b’ and ‘Sifianou 1989’ appear in the wrong order (p. 296), while the same author’s claim regarding the importance of “altruism, generosity, morality and self-abnegation” for Greek is wrongly attributed to the English (pp. 14–15).

As to what concerns content, several of the ideas developed are not novel. The criticisms levelled at previous approaches largely follow the lines of Eelen’s (2001) detailed critique (on the interdependence of Distance and Power, p. 96, see also Tannen and Kakava, 1992; on affect, pp. 96–97, see also Slugoski, 1985). In Chapter 7, the step-by-step analysis of the inferential process (pp. 191, 194, 196, 197, 210–211, 215; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 135–144, 2003: 152–157), the explanatory appeal to frequency of occurrence (p. 193; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 130, 145, 155–161, 2002a: point 1, 2003: 151, 156–157), the importance of tense (p. 196; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 142 n. 45), intonation (pp. 181–182, 190, 198; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 148 n. 53; Terkourafi, 2002a: point 2), and of the surrounding social context/interaction (pp. 199–200, 207; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 144–145; Terkourafi, 2002a: point 2;

Terkourafi, 2003: 154–158), and the discussion of formulaic and semi-formulaic sequences (pp. 186–199; cf. Terkourafi, 2001: 185–187; Terkourafi, 2002b) reiterate points made by Terkourafi (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003) respectively. Given the author’s awareness of this work, it would have been interesting to see how his current analysis compares with these earlier suggestions, and to discuss the commonalities and the differences between the two. The same applies to the appeal to Bourdieu’s practice-based approach, already suggested by Turner (1999/2003), Eelen (2001), and Terkourafi (2001, 2002a).

The intuition behind the politic/polite distinction is not new either. The selfsame intuition was recognised early on, if only implicitly so, by Leech, who differentiated “tact” as “strategic conflict avoidance” from “negative politeness” as “the degree to which the individual behaviour of a particular person [...] exceeds the normal degree of tact required in a given situation” (1980:109; italics added), and by Brown and Levinson, who allowed ‘social accelerator/break’ functions of politeness as strategic, second-order exploitations of their strategies (1978/1987: 93, 228 ff.). Indeed, in this sense, Brown and Levinson are immune to the criticism of not accounting for politic behaviour (p. 95), since politic behaviour is what results when the choice of strategy corresponds to the weightiness value (the sum of Distance, Power and Ranking) of the FTA at hand, yielding the normal, first-order applications of their strategies. More recently, the intuition behind the polite/politic distinction is captured by distinguishing between (im)politeness communicated as a message or not (Jary, 1998), marked/achieved-via-particularised implicature vs. unmarked/achieved-via-generalised-implicature politeness (Terkourafi, 2001, 2002a, 2003), non-default vs. default politeness (Usami, 2002), and inferred vs. anticipated politeness (Haugh, 2003) among others. What is new is the current author’s suggestion to focus on the study of ‘polite’ behaviour alone (i.e., politeness1), to the exclusion of behaviour that is simply ‘politic’. However, two difficulties with operationalising this suggestion must be noted.

The first difficulty concerns the definition of polite behaviour as tending toward the “positive end of the spectrum of politeness” (p. 19), with impoliteness tending toward the negative end of this spectrum (ibid.). The problem with this definition is that it relies on first judging whether departures from politic behaviour tend toward the positive or the negative end of the spectrum of politeness, in order to even begin to define them as polite or impolite behaviour, i.e. mention of “positive” and “negative” ends of the spectrum introduces an implicit evaluative step. This runs contrary to the author’s insistence that singling out a particular behaviour as (im)polite1 “says nothing about how individual members evaluate it” (p. 21). Moreover, whereas initially it is stated that “impolite behaviour will be behaviour that is perceived by participants to be inappropriate behaviour, which again says nothing about how individual members evaluate it” (p. 19), later on we read that “impolite behaviour is thought of in negative terms” (p. 24).

The second difficulty with implementing the politic/polite distinction as currently formulated concerns perceived salience, proposed as the basis for this distinction. The problem lies with determining by whom, the speaker, the hearer, or someone else, viz. the analyst, politic and polite behaviour must be perceived as non-salient and salient respectively. Watts goes on to define politic behaviour as that behaviour “which *the participants* construct as appropriate to the ongoing social interaction” (p. 21; italics added). Nevertheless, perceptions of salience may vary from one person to the next, and

consequently between participants. Such subjectivity is indeed something the author is particularly sensitive to, witness the book's emphasis on politeness I and on "the discursive struggle over politeness I" (pp. 9, 12, 23–25, 143, 252–255), i.e. the fact that participants do not always—or perhaps, not even for the most part—agree on what constitutes polite behaviour, and whether politeness is a good, positive attribute, or a bad, negative one. Consequently, different participants will each time draw the boundary between politic and polite behaviour at a different point.

This seems to be what Watts is actually getting at, judging from what we read on in Chapter 6: "[t]here is simply no *objective* means to measure our feel for politic behaviour, which of course makes it as open to discursive struggle as the term (im)polite itself. . . . The evaluation remains individual and can at best become interpersonal and intersubjective, but can never be objectively verifiable" (p. 164; italics in the original). This point is again emphasised at the end of the chapter—only now, in contrast to the earlier claim, individual evaluation is no longer admissible as the yardstick by which to define politic behaviour: "there are no objective criteria for determining politic behaviour. . . . There are also no purely subjective criteria since social practice is always and only *interactive*. . . . there can be no objective criteria for deciding on what is or is not politic behaviour except for the past experiences of the individual and the perception of similar experiences in the interactive partners" (pp. 166–167; italics in the original). This last claim agrees with [Terkourafi's \(2001, 2002a, 2003\)](#) definition of conventionalisation, a notion central to her approach, as "a relationship holding between utterances and contexts, which is a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used *in one's experience* in a particular context" (2003: 151; italics added).

The acknowledgement that the boundary between politic and polite behaviour is essentially emergent, i.e. always 'in the making', is however repeatedly undermined during the ensuing analysis of examples by programmatic statements as to what constitutes the politic behaviour of a live TV discussion (pp. 139, 170–171), of a radio phone-in programme (pp. 157, 239, 242, 246–247), of a TV interview (p. 224), and so on (pp. 122, 247), as if this were pre-determined, hence obvious to all and readily statable. General comments as to the face-damaging/impolite potential of warnings (p. 197) and interruptions (pp. 22, 236), and the in- and out-of-context ironic interpretation of polite routines (pp. 158, 199–200) taste of a similar prescriptive flavour. Indeed, alternative analyses of several examples are readily imaginable: for instance, burps can express satisfaction with food provided in a Chinese context, hence a Chinese person commenting on this behaviour would not necessarily evaluate it as "impolite" (p. 2); stuttering and the tag *isn't it?* may well be conventionalised means of paying lip service to another's negative face in a British context rather than actively making up for a previous offence (p. 22); use of first names can be familiar rather than demeaning (p. 225); and agreeing interruptions may be supportive rather than impolite (p. 236). Although in a way these alternative analyses strengthen Watts's claim as to the subjectivity of politeness attributions, they are nowhere considered—perhaps because they inevitably also reflect on the value of engaging in such analyses.

Clearly, the 'programmatic' tack just noted would be easily justifiable assuming a general consensus among members of a sociocultural group concerning the politic behaviour expected on different occasions. However, this is a route Watts rightly rejects

(pp. 26, 252, 261–262, 265 n. 1). Rather, the onus is now shifted to participants' own intuitions as to what constitutes politic and, by implication, polite behaviour (pp. 18, 72, 142–143, 162, 201): if consensus is to be appealed to, it should be found therein. Unfortunately, the methodology adopted does not seem up to this. The book is based on 14 real-life exchanges (11 recorded excerpts of British English; one recounted incident and two emails showing cross-cultural miscommunication in English), while constructed (?) examples are used to criticise previous approaches (chapters 3, 4) and to develop the proposed analysis (chapter 7). All examples are taken from English, leaving the promise for “the occasional example taken from elsewhere” (p. 17) unfulfilled. This rather limited corpus from a single language does not allow common perceptions as to what constitutes politic behaviour to emerge, whereas alternative methodological approaches—e.g., Mills's (2003) post facto interviewing of informants, quantitative analysis of corpus or elicited data (Terkourafi, 2001 and Usami, 2002 respectively)—which would seem more suitable to reveal common perceptions are not discussed. As a result, consensus is implicitly assumed in the guise of programmatic statements, in the face of which even participants' intuitions are occasionally rejected (p. 224). Such statements contrast with the book's avowed aim to capture participants' intuitions about politeness¹, resulting in a lingering equivocality as to how politic behaviour is determined on each occasion. No less than eight definitions of politic (pp. 19, 20–21, 76, 115, 145, 161, 201–202, 257) and instances of uncertainty regarding the boundary between politic and polite (pp. 130, 140) do little to dispel this equivocality.

The requirement for at least a theoretical basis that would justify assuming a general consensus among members of a sociocultural group concerning the politic behaviour expected on different occasions could be met by Bourdieu's notion of the habitus. It is actually possible that the author sees various normative claims (such as those made on, e.g., pp. 14, 18) as justified against the background of this notion. Several aspects of the Bourdieuan notion would allow it to fulfil this role: its being “automatic and impersonal” (Bourdieu, 1990: 58); its functioning “below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will” (Bourdieu, 1984: 466); but most importantly, its developing in response to “objective conditions of existence” (Bourdieu, 1990: 52) such that similar conditions of existence can give rise to “homologous habitus” (Bourdieu, 1990: 55), and the fact that “since the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of his class or group, *each individual system of dispositions* may be seen as a *structural variant* of all other group or class habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977: 86). However, other than a brief mention near the end (p. 258), these aspects are not currently sufficiently emphasised. Instead, references to “the habitus that an individual *needs to* develop *in order to* function in a social field” (p. 153; italics added), “the various kinds of habitus each of us forms *in order to* perform adequately” (p. 247; italics added), “*knowledge of latent networks*” being part of the habitus (p. 155; italics added), and the selfsame definition of habitus in the glossary as “the set of dispositions to behave in a manner which is appropriate to the social structures objectified *by an individual* through her/his experience of social interaction” (p. 274; italics added) emphasise the individual dimension of habitus and do little to discourage a potential interpretation of habitus as something conscious that one develops purposefully (and, perhaps, even has a choice

over changing, p. 269 n. 7). In this way, the explanatory potential of this notion within the present model is significantly weakened.

All in all, the present book contains interesting insights that can fuel further research. As such, its main contribution is to re-opening the debate around linguistic politeness. Alongside other recent publications (e.g., Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003, the all new *Journal of Politeness Research*) it forms part of a welcome trend to tackle linguistic politeness at a theoretical level, testifying to the overall vitality of the field of politeness studies.

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Marina Terkourafi is A.G. Leventis post-doctoral research fellow at the British School at Athens and a visiting scholar at the Department of Linguistics and at the Computer Laboratory, both at the University of Cambridge. She has taught at the Universities of Cambridge, Cyprus and Athens. Her research interests include the semantics/pragmatics interface, cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and historical linguistics.

Marina Terkourafi
British School at Athens, Soudias 52
GR-10676 Athens, Greece
 Tel.: +32 210 3646470
 fax: +32 210 7228272
 E-mail address: mt217@cam.ac.uk
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