

## Book Review

### **The Pragmatics of Politeness**

Geoffrey Leech. Oxford University Press, 2014. 368 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-534135-5

Reviewed by:

Kevin Pat

*Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong*

Nearly 30 years has passed since Leech (1983) proposed his seminal politeness model. During this time, politeness studies have undergone a paradigm shift to the discursive approach, which argues that politeness is not encoded in language and that it must be analysed from the perspective of the local contexts in which it is situated. This is not an unprecedented move, as Leech (1983) foresaw the importance of studying politeness in local situations through his concept of relative politeness, which he contrasts with absolute politeness, the latter explaining how politeness can be inherent in language. In *The Pragmatics of Politeness*, Leech makes a necessary return to absolute politeness, which he renames pragmalinguistic politeness to avoid further misunderstandings, and addresses the criticisms of his original approach to politeness. In doing so, he succinctly reviews the major developments over the past 30 years and reformulates his seminal model to account for them. While not ignoring sociopragmatic politeness, Leech primarily focuses on pragmalinguistic politeness and provides an illustrative account disputing the recent views that linguistic phenomena cannot be classified as (im)polite. Leech's numerous references to Asian conceptions of politeness make this book an important reference for readers of AJAL.

In Chapter 1, Leech clearly articulates key features of politeness and its centrality to human behaviour from social and psychological perspectives. He is also cognizant of key distinctions in politeness debates, one of which relates to the significance that some Asian languages and cultures place on "elaborate honorific systems enabling speakers to show degrees of respect or deference to the addressee or to a third party" (p.9). He argues that these honorific systems still fall within the realm of politeness, but that they more appropriately belong to his notion of bivalent politeness rather than trivalent politeness, which "is more central to politeness in the English-speaking world" (p.11). Chapters 2 and 3 present the theoretical underpinnings for the kind of politeness that Leech has in mind; a politeness that is firmly grounded in pragmatics. Readers from Asian contexts may enjoy Leech's review of influential Chinese and Japanese politeness studies and their impact on the two pioneering, but Western and English language biased, politeness frameworks of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983).

Before explaining his revised model of politeness, Leech, in Chapter 4, responds directly to criticisms of his earlier work. Those in Asian contexts will be especially interested in his stance against the, so called, great divide in politeness between Eastern and Western cultures. While appreciating that Brown and Levinson's (1987) treatment

of politeness contained a Western bias towards individualistic wants, he contends that the Eastern preference for group ethos is not an absolute contradiction to Western individualism, but rather that “they are positions on a scale” (p. 83). He then explicates his reformulated model and illustrates its applicability in English and Asian contexts. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus primarily on English examples and research on English realizations of politeness to demonstrate his new model in analysis. These chapters concisely reflect on the literature about typical speech events most relevant to his model and could prove useful to those taking a functional approach to English language teaching in Asia.

Leech’s model of politeness also considers the phenomenon of impoliteness, which Culpeper (2011) contends “casts a much larger shadow than its frequency of usage would suggest” (p. 131). Chapter 8 is dedicated to the exposition of how this phenomenon relates to his politeness model, while acknowledging that impoliteness has its own unique features such as the subtle opposites, sarcasm and banter. Chapter 9 considers a range of data collection methods for studying politeness. Rather than further discrediting the much maligned collection tool of discourse completion tests, he frames it in relation to a number of other common tools and presents a nuanced picture, arguing that a combination of methods remains best practice. Chapter 10 offers a brief account of politeness within interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics and sketches a path to how his new model can, for example, explain some of the perplexing findings from Chinese politeness studies that have applied his previous model. Finally, a historical view of politeness is taken in Chapter 11 and, through this, Leech offers a preliminary view on whether politeness in human behaviour is on the decline.

This book is an insightful account of the pragmatics of politeness and its most pertinent elements. Discourse and conversation analysts may take issue with the minimal attention paid to how discourse management affects politeness interpretations. This is understandable since pragmalinguistic politeness is the focus of this book. Those interested in politeness in Asia and how it has influenced Western politeness theories will find Chapters 2 and 4 most relevant, although many other chapters will also serve as an excellent reference for any cross-cultural or intercultural study of politeness.

### About the reviewer

Kevin Pat is an assistant lecturer at the Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong. His research interests include pragmatics, specifically (im)politeness, and classroom discourse.

### References

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