

A Benchmark for Politeness

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Abstract (Im)politeness is never a depersonalized, decontextualized absolute but always a perception or judgement of appropriate behaviour on a given occasion—what one expects oneself and others to do in a particular social interaction. Nevertheless, it is normal for most tabooed words and phrases to be castigated in dictionaries as dysphemistic (having connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance). For example, in a range of dictionaries, *shit* is judged ‘coarse’, ‘obscene’, ‘insulting’, ‘vulgar’, ‘profane’, ‘taboo’, ‘impolite’, and ‘offensive’. No rationale is given for any of these ex cathedra value judgements in the dictionaries, nor in media outlets, but a middle-class politeness criterion (MCPC) was proposed in Allan and Burridge, *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon*. (New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 21, 31, 1991):

In order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle-class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dispreferred counterpart. The dispreferred counterpart would be a dysphemism.

Orthophemisms (straight talking) and euphemisms (sweet talking) are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred (undesirable, inappropriate) expression because they avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also the hearer or some third party. An orthophemism is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding more colloquial and figurative euphemism. There is no suggestion that the MCPC fails to apply between, say, close acquaintances of the same sex or any other dyad; however, language exchange between casual acquaintances of different sexes offers the most probable default conditions for the MCPC and, in this chapter, I claim that, with some slight adjustment, the MCPC offers a benchmark for politeness within Anglo communities. Following a discussion of (im)politeness theories and hypotheses about face management, (cultural) scripts, and habitus, the MCPC is closely examined, explained, and tested in the course of

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examining some texts. This chapter concludes with proposals to resolve the apparent limitations of the MCPC.

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1 Overview¹

During the past 20 years or more there has been an enormous amount written about politeness and somewhat less about impoliteness (e.g. Lakoff 1973, Ide 1982; Brown and Levinson 1987; Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Ide 1989; Fraser 1990; Gu 1990; Allan and Burrige 1991, 2006; Sifianou 1992; Watts et al. 1992; Mao 1994; Lee-Wong 2000; Eelen 2001; Terkourafi 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003; Spencer-Oatey 2005; Haugh 2007; Bousfield 2008, Bousfield and Locher 2008; Haugh 2010; Culpeper 2011; Terkourafi 2011, 2012, *inter multos alios*). Various attempts have been made to define politeness and impoliteness and to classify and rank what are perceived to be their constituents. In the next section, I review some of these contributions and state my own preferences. What surprises me when reading this literature is that the grounds for counting a language expression polite or impolite are left implicit, a criticism that I justify in my review of the literature. All judgements that a given expression is polite or impolite are made based on the researcher's opinion or that reported by an informant, without the grounds for these judgements being explicitly identified.² By and large they do seem intuitively sound, though quibbles can arise. My own practice when discussing (im)politeness in Allan (1986 Vol. 1, pp. 10–36) was open to this same objection, but in work with Kate Burrige (Allan and Burrige 1991, 2006), we suggested a basis for the fact that although particular language expressions are not necessarily euphemistic in all contexts, it ignores reality to pretend that ordinary people do not speak and act as if some expressions are intrinsically euphemistic and others dysphemistic—for instance, *loo* is euphemistic whereas *shithouse* is not. What this means is that, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in, say, a middle-class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism rather than its dispreferred counterpart(s). A dispreferred counterpart would be dysphemistic (i.e. would, for one reason or another, cause offense). This middle-class politeness criterion (MCPC) is the focus of this chapter and is claimed to be the benchmark

¹ I am grateful to Kate Burrige, Jonathan Culpeper, Michael Haugh, Marina Terkourafi, and others for advice on earlier versions of this essay. Because I did not always take their advice, the usual disclaimer applies: No one but me is responsible for its flaws.

² This complaint applies to corpus-based studies and experimental work using questionnaires such as that reported in, for example, Culpeper 2011; Culpeper et al. 2010; Haugh 2007; Sifianou 1992; Spencer-Oatey 2005; Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003; Watts 2003. We need to establish and explain the basis for people's opinions and not simply invoke social norms and conventions without accounting for them.

for intuitions that lead to the unexplicated judgements of (im)politeness criticised above. I shall proceed to explain its character, strengths, and limitations. I shall also show why it is that a criterion devised to account for evaluations of X-phemism (the union of euphemism, dysphemism, and orthophemism) should function as a benchmark for (im)politeness. In Sect. 2, I review theories of (im)politeness; in Sect. 3, there is detailed discussion of the (slightly revised) MCPC and a deconstruction of its composition; Sect. 4 inspects some texts to assess application of the MCPC; Sect. 5 briefly summarises.

2 Theories of (Im)politeness

Whether or not writers on (im)politeness accept the cooperative principle of Grice 1975, they all seem to accept that, if communication is to proceed smoothly, interlocutors must cooperate with one another to some extent (Fraser 1990 refers to a ‘conversational contract’, Arndt and Janney 1985 to ‘supportiveness’); this recognises one important element of common ground between speaker and hearer (see Clark 1996; Lee 2001; Stalnaker 2002; Allan 2013b, c). If X does not wish to communicate with Y, X must nonetheless know how *not* to cooperate. Some examples are: when being admonished by a parent, the child who blocks their ears and yells *Blah! Blah! Blah!*; a person slams down the telephone on being called by someone they have no wish to speak with; the person who takes an injunction out against a troublesome neighbour. All these require the knowledge of how to cooperate with an interlocutor in order not to do so. Most researchers into politeness accept that a large part of cooperative behaviour can be explained in terms of mutual presentation of face and reactions to it (Goffman 1955; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987, inter alios). So, I shall briefly discuss face and the reasons for it being so important to (im)politeness.

Erving Goffman wrote:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself. (Goffman 1955, p. 213)

Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) paraphrase Goffman’s definition as ‘the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself’ and they go on to decompose face into two coexisting aspects: ‘positive face’, the want of a person that their attributes, achievements, ideas, possessions, goals, etc. should be desirable to at least some approved others; and ‘negative face’, the want of a person not to be imposed upon by others.³ Brown and Levinson’s claim to the universality of their

³ This may be a reworking of Goffman’s ‘the person will have two points of view—a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and protective orientation toward saving the other’s face’ (Goffman 1955, p. 18).

politeness theory has been castigated for being Anglocentric because it categorizes face in terms of personal wants and also for its concept of negative face. I believe that the objection to negative face can be deflected, but that is not germane to my discussion of politeness. According to Brown and Levinson and their followers/interpreters, the face effect of an act is calculated against the sum of three pragmatic factors: (a) the social distance between the actor and the undergoer, determined on such parameters as their comparative ages, sexes, sociocultural backgrounds, and any pre-existing acquaintance; (b) an asymmetric power relation between actor and undergoer; and (c) the intrinsic weightiness (impositiveness) of the particular act (e.g. to ask someone the time is typically less onerous than asking to borrow their car, but in an emergency the latter may be excusable). Each of these parameters⁴ is subject to different evaluations by different participants and observers on different occasions and under different contextual conditions; nonetheless, each is relevant to the proper behaviour of participants in a social interaction and may be referred to if a particular act is judged polite or impolite, and so must be taken into account by language users. Almost any act towards an undergoer has the potential to be threatening and thereby face threatening, even just uttering a greeting or failing to do so; thus, face work is required to manage social interaction. Brown and Levinson are criticised for identifying a hierarchy of linguistic strategies for dealing with face-threatening acts (FTAs) that they claimed to be universal. What does seem universal is that there is in the language of each social group, a hierarchy of such strategies, but they may be different in form from those proposed by Brown and Levinson. As an example of the kind of thing I am talking about, see (1):

(1) [Situation: speaker S is seeking change for a slot machine from addressee H.]

- a. *Got any change?* [Bald on record to a close friend, relation, or someone that S feels s/ he can boss around.]
- b. *Hey Harry, have you got any change?* [Politely to a friend, relation, or colleague. Attention paid to H's feelings by putatively giving H the option to refuse.]
- c. *I'm sorry to trouble you, but do you by any chance have change of this five-dollar note?* [H is a ladylike stranger on whom male S is imposing.]
- d. *It's so embarrassing, but I don't have enough change.* [S squirms before H whom s/he is trying to favourably impress.]

One could add at least a dozen more variations on the theme. At first sight it may look as though the use of different language expressions indicates a semantic basis for (im)politeness; however, although lexical meaning and the particular syntactic configurations of items—which are often formulaic (Wray and Perkins 2000; Terkourafi 2001)—have their part to play in (im)politeness, it is the strategic way that those language expressions are used, i.e. the pragmatics, which is crucial. A question to pose is: What is the basis for the Brown and Levinson politeness strategies? And the answer must be their intuitions as speakers of English, or their and others' intuitions about Tzeltal and Tamil. In this chapter, I make no specific claims about languages other than present-day English because I do not have the data to do so,

⁴ Slugoski and Turnbull (1988) suggest an additional parameter, affect, measuring the degree of existing antagonism between the interlocutors. Whether this should be an additional parameter or included under (a), I leave to the reader. All these parameters are, in reality, extremely complex.

but in Sect. 5, I do comment on what is likely to be the case for other languages and other times.

From the foregoing sketch I draw the following conclusions. Speaking to others is a social activity, and like other social activities (such as dancing, playing in an orchestra, playing cards, or football) the people involved, S and H, mutually recognise—as part of their common ground—that certain conventions govern their actions and their use of language, both when speaking and when interpreting the actions and utterances of their interlocutor. Each interlocutor is held responsible for observing or violating the conventions of language interchange. A subset of those conventions involves face work.⁵ Almost any act by S towards H has the potential to be face threatening; what renders most acts benign are the circumstances under which they take place and the perceived relations between the participants. As Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 61) write, ‘normally everyone’s face depends on everyone else’s being maintained’ (echoing Goffman 1955, p. 216). As Leech (1983, p. 109) puts it in his tact maxim: For any act, S should minimize the cost to H and maximize the benefit to H. Face is one’s ‘public self-image’ in the sense that it is, for a given social encounter, a person’s belief about the way others perceive them acting within that encounter (hence, Goffman’s ‘social value’), and it is not necessarily the individual alone but also people he or she may be taken to represent (family, gender, school, team, profession, ideology, etc.; Goffman 1955, p. 213). Hence, one must not *let the side/family/country/party/...down*.

The Brown and Levinson concept of face has been condemned for being in part inapplicable to Japanese (Matsumoto 1988, 1989; Ide 1989) and also to Chinese (Gu 1990; Mao 1994; Lee-Wong 2000) largely because of the need to heed social hierarchy and moral/ethical values in those societies. The difference is, I believe, a matter of emphasis rather than being a qualitative distinction because, to at least some extent in Western (including Anglo) society, public self-image is constituted from a person’s place in the social structure (one’s social identity), which includes recognition of the face concerns of the undergoer and bystanders.⁶ Significantly, Mao (1994, p. 473) distinguishes the Chinese/Japanese concept of face as ‘*public image*’ versus ‘*public self-image*’; however, a person’s own assessment of their *public image*, meaning ‘the image they present to others, what others esteem them for’, is what is meant by *public self-image*—which is not simplistically selfish or individualistic.⁷ Thus, in order to make sense of what Mao, Matsumoto, and others may be referring to, it helps to consider aspects of a person’s notion of self or identity:

Psychological theories of identity typically distinguish between personal (individual) and social (group or collective) identities. Individual identity refers to self-definition as a unique individual, whereas collective identity refers to self-definition as a group member. (Spencer-Oatey 2007, p. 641)

⁵ Its complement includes knowledge of grammar.

⁶ Sifianou (2011, p. 44) correctly notes that Brown and Levinson are wrongly accused of ignoring this.

⁷ Yu (2001) convincingly demonstrates that Chinese and Anglo concepts of face are far more similar than they are different and though Fukushima (2013) began with the hypothesis that Japanese rate attentiveness to others more highly than Americans, she found that there was in fact very little difference.

Now, it seems to me that what Spencer-Oatey refers to as ‘individual identity’ is principally involved in the Brown and Levinson concept of face, whereas the ‘collective identity’ is principally involved in the Japanese and Chinese concept of face as described by the authors cited. Certainly, the notions of politeness favoured by, e.g. Fraser (1990), Escandell-Vidal (1996), Terkourafi (1999), Spencer-Oatey (2000), Eelen (2001), Terkourafi (2001), Escandell-Vidal (2009) allow for a more socially oriented account of politeness than is attributed to Brown and Levinson.

Spencer-Oatey (2000), Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003), Spencer-Oatey (2005), Spencer-Oatey (2007) described (im)politeness as ‘rapport management’, resulting from the interplay of face, social identity, and ‘sociality rights’. Rapport management involves (a) choice of discourse content and the form of its presentation (lexical, grammatical, and prosodic choices); (b) ‘score-keeping’ in terms of Lewis (1979)—procedural matters such as turn taking and attention to other participants and what they say; (c) gesture, eye contact, and other kinesic attributes of face-to-face interaction (Spencer-Oatey 2000, p. 19 f.). Although all of these things are referred to in Brown and Levinson (1978), Brown and Levinson (1987), the Spencer-Oatey hypothesis has proved more acceptable in cross-cultural adaptation (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003, Culpeper et al. 2010). Certainly, the focus on social identity with sociality rights and obligations is an appropriate move away from the focus on individual face wants, which is the hallmark of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory. Social identity includes what one thinks of oneself as a person and as a group member (of family, firm, gender, etc.)—which overlaps with sociality rights and obligations. These are what one expects oneself and others to do in social interactions,⁸ and they typically form a part of common ground: When these expectations are not met, the consequence is a sense of injustice. Any behaviour on the part of another which evokes this sense of injustice has the potential to be judged dysphemistic and impolite. Here is a line leading back to the view of politeness in Lakoff (1973) who suggested some ‘rules’ for behaving politely: be deferential, do not impose; give options; be friendly. Leech (1983) also sees politeness in terms of displaying amicability. Politeness, then, is a display of consideration for others (Arndt and Janney 1985; Fraser 1990; Sifianou 1992; Haugh 2004); but there are different conceptions of what is meant by *consideration for others* among different groups (‘communities of practice’ in terms of e.g. Schnurr et al. 2008). This arises because politeness is never a depersonalized, decontextualized absolute but always a perception or judgement of appropriate behaviour on a given occasion; in words used earlier ‘what one expects oneself and others to do’ in a particular social interaction. This ties politeness to frames and scripts and to the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1991; Eelen 2001; Terkourafi 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003).

Very little we encounter is entirely new, and our brains look for, detect, and store structured patterns of information that constitute part of ‘common knowledge’ in the sense of Lewis (1969) and ‘mutual knowledge’ in the sense of Schiffer (1972). I use *frame* for the set of characteristic features, attributes, and functions of a denotatum,

⁸ Spencer-Oatey refers to them as ‘equity rights’ and ‘association rights’ (Spencer-Oatey 2000, p. 14).

plus its characteristic interactions with things necessarily or typically associated with it (cf. Minsky 1977; Fillmore 1982); and I use *script* for structured information about stereotyped dynamic event sequences whose components are, typically, predictable (cf. Schank and Abelson 1977; Schank 1984).⁹ Some of these frames and scripts are appealed to in what one expects oneself and others to do in a particular social interaction, and they provide the basis for appropriate behaviour (see Fraser 1990; Escandell-Vidal 1996; Terkourafi 1999; Allan 2001; Eelen 2001; Terkourafi 2001; Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004; Goddard 2006; Escandell-Vidal 2009). Escandell-Vidal (1996, 2009) suggests that these frames and scripts are learned as part of one's socialization as a human being and that they, like language competence, degenerate after puberty so that postpubescent exposure to a new culture renders a non-native-like ability in practice—which explains why out-groupers often seem impolite. The socialization gives rise to expected behaviours (consistent with Fraser 1990), which are therefore unmarked behaviours.

However, what one participant judges apposite may not be deemed appropriate by another participant or observer. This discrepancy of perception arises through the personal habitus of the individual (see Watts 2003, p. 163 for an example). Habitus is the (collective) disposition that generates practices, perceptions, and attitudes within a social group, acquired (like frames, scripts, and other aspects of socialization) through the activities and experiences of everyday life. Habitus interacts with particular contexts and events to shape the way an individual internalises social structures and appropriate ways (as well as inappropriate ways) to react to them. Although habitus is, like Saussure's 'langue',¹⁰ fundamentally a collective disposition shared with other members of a community, each individual within the community contributes to the habitus and utilizes his or her version of it. Like language, habitus is constantly evolving. (Im)politeness is a function of habitus and it, too, is constantly mutating.

The MCPC is a cognitive frame or cultural script¹¹ proposed to account for X-phemistic language which is the product of what, for now, we can refer to as (im)polite behaviour (this will be refined later to include Watts' 'politic behaviour' p. 12). Thus, what the MCPC is intended to capture is that to be polite is to act considerately towards others, in particular the undergoer and the people and things (including beliefs) that the undergoer holds dear. To be impolite is to disparage explicitly (or implicitly discount from consideration, e.g. by ignoring) any of these; thus, '[i]mpoliteness is behaviour that is face aggravating in a particular context' (Locher and Bousfield 2008, p. 3). Some standard examples of impolite behaviour include: the use of obfuscating language (often castigated as *jargon*); the use of an inappropriate style (slang, language that is too familiar and colloquial or, on other

⁹ See Allan (2001) for more detail. These are also called 'schemata' (Bartlett 1932; Mazzone 2011), 'scenarios' (Sanford and Garrod 1981), and 'assumed familiarity' (Prince 1981). 'Cognitive frames' as described in Terkourafi (1999) are more like what I refer to as scripts.

¹⁰ Saussure (1931, p. 25).

¹¹ See Eelen (2001), Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004), Goddard (2006). I do not believe such a script has to be couched in Natural Semantic Metalanguage, nor is it restricted to lexical meaning.

occasions, too formal); profane swearing (using profane and/or obscene language); language that insults through lies, insinuation, innuendo, casting aspersions, digs, snide comments, insolence, ridiculing, name-calling; shouting down or threatening.¹² All such dysphemisms are wont to cause harassment, alarm or distress and be judged *rude* or *hurtful*. People who are impolite are judged rude, coarse, and ill-bred, unmannerly or just plain nasty; occasionally, when being impolite, they manifest that they are ill-socialized.

There is a connection between being polite and being polished, well mannered, and of good breeding. I referred above to the need in Chinese and Japanese conceptions of politeness to heed social hierarchy and moral/ethical values. There were echoes of this in the West stemming from antiquity, passed down in the educational system from the likes of Cicero's *De officiis* which championed *quod dici latine decorum potest; graece enim πρόπον dicitur...et quod decet honestum est et quod honestum est decet* (what in Latin may be called decorum; in Greek it is called propriety...what is proper is morally right, and what is morally right is proper; Cicero 1928 I.27.94). By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the morality was implicit in the inculcation of good manners. 'True Politeness' equates to 'Good Behaviour and Social Etiquette' and 'It embraces the Customs and Usages of Good Society' (Anonymous 1875, title page). Politeness is sensitive to social standing. In Fielding's novel, *The History of Tom Jones*, the two lady's maids of Sophia and her supposedly more sophisticated aunt have a tiff, which leads the latter maid to assert her superiority by being impolite:

Creature! You are below my anger, saucy trollop; but, hussy, I must tell you your breeding shows the meanness of your birth as well as of your education, and both very properly qualify you to be the mean serving-woman of a country-girl. (Fielding 1749 VII. 8)

In her turn, Sophia's maid puts on airs, asserting her own superiority over the landlady of an inn who has boasted 'Several people of the first quality are now in bed. Here's a great young squire, and many other great gentlefolks of quality':

Sure you people who keep inns imagine your betters are like yourselves. [...] Don't tell me [...] of quality! I believe I know more of people of quality than such as you. [...] Good woman, I must insist your first washing your hands [before you slice me some bacon]; for I am extremely nice and have been always used from my cradle to have everything in the most elegant manner.' The landlady [...] governed herself with much difficulty. [...] 'I beg the kitchen may be kept clear, that I may not be surrounded with all the blackguards in town; as for you, sir,' says she to Partridge, 'you look somewhat like a gentleman, and may sit still if you please; I don't desire to disturb anybody but mob. (Fielding 1749 X.4)

¹² An insult assails the target with contemptuous, perhaps insolent, language intended to wound or disparage. People may be likened to and ascribed behaviour pertaining to animals, body parts and effluvia connected with sex, micturition, and defecation, sexual perversions, physical and mental abnormalities, character deficiencies, or attacked with '-ist' dysphemisms. All these are found in both true insults and also ritual insults (banter) among an in-group. See Allan and Burrige (2006), also Culpeper (2011).

The linking of politeness to social class is also demonstrated in:

Purity and Politeness of Expression [...] is the only external Distinction which remains between a Gentleman and a Valet; a Lady and a Mantua-maker. (Withers 1789, p. 161)

But, despite the wording of the MCPC, politeness behaviour is not simplistically determined by social class. It is manifest differently in different environments (different communities of practice).

Politeness is the ritual of society, as prayers are of the church; a school of manners, and a gentle blessing to the age in which it grew. (Emerson 1856, p. 325)

Every polite tongue has its own rules. (Murray 1824, p. 174)

Politeness, as I hope to have made clear, is wedded to what is spoken of, the participants and bystanders, the place, and the time period.¹³ (Im)politeness is not absolute but relative to the occasion (Allan and Burrige 2006; Haugh 2007; Bousfield 2008; Mills 2011), which brings me to the motivation for this essay: Certain forms of behaviour and certain language expressions are, nonetheless, regarded as intrinsically (im)polite. I do not discuss forms of behaviour here but stick closely to language expressions. I begin with the fact that it is normal for most tabooed words and phrases to be branded in dictionaries as dysphemistic (having connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance). For example, *shit* is judged 'coarse' by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED 1989) and WordNet 3 (Farlex Inc. 2011) which adds the epithets 'obscene' and 'insulting'; it is judged 'vulgar' by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000), *Merriam-Webster* (online), and Wikipedia which adds 'profane'; the *Collins English Dictionary* (2003) correctly identifies the word as 'taboo'; the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2010 identifies it as 'taboo, slang'; and *Kernerman English Multilingual Dictionary* (2010) as 'an impolite or offensive word'. These are connotations and therefore pragmatic (see Allan 2007 for elaborated discussion).¹⁴ What is the basis for these judgements? I suggest that the benchmark is the MCPC.

¹³ There is a lot more evidence for this in Terkourafi (2011) and some more in Allan and Burrige (2006).

¹⁴ Allan (2007, p 1047) defines connotation as follows: 'The connotations of a language expression are pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopaedic knowledge about its denotation (or reference) and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used.' For example, the salient bovine in English language children's books is, for good reasons, a *cow*: There are more cows than bulls where there is a dominant dairy industry, and also in the beef industry where one bull will service up to 35 cows to maintain stock levels. Thus, for economic reasons (milk production, reproductive value) female bovines are more common and more important than males. *Dog* is a gendered generic that may be used of a bitch. This is because dogs are bred as protectors and working animals; their reproductive functions are peripheral and may even interfere with these primary functions. Hence, by default, the male is the preferred domestic canine, and this pragmatic effect is captured in the connotation of *dog*. (For the connotations of *bitch* see Allan 1992). The connotations of gender for the terms *surgeon*, *nurse*, *secretary/receptionist*, and *motor mechanic* derive from the facts that the typical jobholder in each case is (even today) a gendered stereotype: most surgeons and motor mechanics are male; most nurses and secretary/receptionists are female. These connotations are all, clearly, the pragmatic effects of normative conceptions of typical jobholders.

3 The MCPC

The first *OED* meaning for the verb *belch* reads ‘To void wind noisily from the stomach through the mouth, to eructate. (Now vulgar.)’ This means that the act of belching is vulgar, not the word *belch*, which is an orthophemism.¹⁵ This judgement is based on the lexicographer’s intuition. Although any one lexicographer will probably check (where possible) on the judgements of earlier lexicographers, where the buck stops is the intuition of that lexicographer. So, what is this intuition based on? No rationale is given for any of the ex cathedra value judgements in the dictionaries, nor in media outlets,¹⁶ so Allan and Burridge (1991, 2006) proposed one, called the MCPC. A slightly updated version is given in (2):

(2) Among adults, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dispreferred counterpart. The dispreferred counterpart would be a dysphemism.

We see a correlation between dysphemism and impoliteness, whereas both euphemism and orthophemism are typically polite; i.e. X-phemisms are the products of (im)politeness and consequently indicate aspects of (im)politeness. Orthophemisms and euphemisms are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred (undesirable, inappropriate) expression because they avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also loss of face by the hearer or some third party. A *dispreferred language expression* is simply one that is not felt to be the preferred or desired or appropriate expression.¹⁷ What motivates such feelings is one’s socialization within one’s local sub-culture as part of a wider culture. One example is that under most circumstances the dispreferred response to an invitation is refusal; dispreferred responses to a greeting are a dismissal or a cold stare. An orthophemism (e.g. *faeces*, *vagina*) is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding more colloquial and figurative euphemism (cf. *poo* and *down there*). A dysphemism is a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance (cf. *shit* and *cunt*). Like euphemism, dysphemism is sometimes motivated by fear and distaste, but also by hatred and contempt. Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them, things and people they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate, and degrade. Dysphemisms are therefore characteristic of political groups and cliques talking about their opponents, of feminists speaking about men, and also of male larrikins and macho types speaking of women and effete

¹⁵ *Belch* is an orthophemism, *burp* is a euphemism; there is no standard dysphemism, but *mouth fart* would fit the bill.

¹⁶ Legal decisions may be an exception. Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 36 f.) report a legal decision on a charge of using offensive language in which the magistrate’s dismissal of the charge was based on his perception of the language expressions frequently heard on television.

¹⁷ This psycho-emotive characterization of the preferred–dispreferred dichotomy is at odds with its use by conversational analysts like Atkinson and Drew (1979), Bilmes (1988), Toolan (1989) or Boyle (2000).

behaviours. Dysphemistic expressions include curses, name-calling, and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or wound them. Dysphemism is also a way to let off steam; for example when exclamatory swearwords alleviate frustration or anger (see Allan and Burridge 2009).

Both euphemism and orthophemism are typically polite; they differ in that an orthophemism makes bald-on-record reference to a topic, where a euphemism distances the speaker from it through figurative language, while at the same time being less formal and/or more colloquial—compare orthophemistic *faeces* or *die* with euphemistic *poo* and *pass away*. I do not want to suggest that such classifications are uncontroversial, but some of the controversy arises from the fact that different contexts impose different standards of appropriateness. For instance, although many people abhor the term *cunt*, others wish to reclaim it for in-group use as a marker of social identity, cf. *Cunt: A Declaration of Independence* (Muscio 2002) and ‘Reclaiming Cunt’ in Enslar (2008, p. 101 f.). This is comparable with the adoption of *nigger/nigga* as an acceptable in-group marker among some African-Americans. There are additional reasons for using what in other contexts would be dysphemistic. For example, at moments of intimacy, lovers may pleasurably and inoffensively refer to (what in public are) tabooed body parts using terms that would be dysphemistic in a doctor’s surgery. Among a group of male soldiers in a bar, the term *shithouse* would most likely be non-dysphemistic and if one of them used the euphemism *loo* instead (other than jokingly) he would risk being laughed at and this normally euphemistic term could be regarded as dysphemistic because it would be as insulting to the others as addressing them using baby language. It is useful here to adopt Richard Watts’ term *politic behaviour*: ‘Politic behaviour is that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the on-going social interaction’ (Watts 2003, p. 20); it is non-salient, whereas, according to Watts, politeness and impoliteness are both salient. I do not fully agree with Watts in this characterisation of (im)politeness, but the adoption of terms that are frequently judged dysphemistic as effective orthophemisms under certain circumstances can be classed as politic behaviour. Politic behaviour is unmarked behaviour that seeks to maintain the social status quo; it is what is expected under Grice’s ‘cooperative principle’ and Fraser’s ‘conversational contract’. It is in part what underlies Brown and Levinson’s notion that the norm is to maintain face all round. Typically, use of orthophemism is politic behaviour. So, politic behaviour joins (im)politeness as one of the pragmatic functions of the MCPC.

I return to the definition for the MCPC in (2), the first sentence of which reads ‘Among adults, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dispreferred counterpart’. Why the mention of (a) ‘[a]mong adults’; (b) ‘a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex’; (c) ‘a formal situation’; (d) ‘in a middle-class environment’ when politeness is not in fact restricted to just these four conditions, i.e. they are not necessary conditions? The brief answer is that (2) identifies the set of the most probable conditions for politeness. I am certainly not suggesting that the MCPC fails to apply between children or between close acquaintances of the same sex or among members of the

highest and the lowest socioeconomic class. However, the biological differences between men and women have led to social differences that mostly reflect sexual tension, for example the constraints placed on the display and accessibility of bodies of women of child-bearing age that do not apply equally to men of the same age,¹⁸ nor do the tolerated differences in relative sexual freedom of women and men. These ensure a tension (that seems to be universal) between adult males and females because of their distinct social roles, even when there is no conscious desire present for sex or romance. The need for a certain social distance is greater among casual acquaintances, because there is no established relationship to encourage overfamiliarity and potentially unwelcome banter.¹⁹ These social differences account for conditions (a) and (b). I should add that the ‘adults’ referred to have the characteristics ascribed to the apocryphal *man on the Clapham omnibus* or *the man who takes the magazines at home and in the evening pushes the lawn mower in his shirt sleeves* or *the man in the street*—all of which were intended to refer to very ordinary persons of either sex. These expressions were used in defining the meaning of *a reasonable man* by Lord Justice Greer in *Hall v. Brookside Club* (*Law reports, King’s Bench Division* Vol. I, 1933, p. 224); but they serve my purpose well.²⁰ By definition, formal situations²¹ require participants to hold social roles that are often institutionally defined, usually by convention but occasionally by explicit regulation, which typically prescribe a readily perceptible social distance among participants. Informal situations encourage camaraderie and a colloquial style that is tolerant of less-overt politeness. All these situations give rise to what Escandell-Vidal (1996), Terkourafi (1999, 2001, 2012) call ‘cognitive frames’ and I refer to as frames or scripts that an individual habitus has recourse to. Hence, (c) is a constraint on (a) and (b).

And (d) limits all of (a), (b), and (c). The phrase ‘middle-class environment’ is not intended to constrain the actual application of the MCPC in real life to members of the socioeconomic class between the upper class and the working class (Murray 1824); in (2), it identifies an idealized constraint based on the cultural norms in a particular segment of Anglo society. Why choose the term *middle class*? Well, just as the newly rich gentfolk of the post-Medieval period strove to adopt the manners of the court and nobility, so does what I am here calling the middle-class strive to adopt those manners of their social superiors which they approve of. The manners

¹⁸ Informal observation at a local beach (Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Australia) where nudism is permitted reveals that about 90% of nudists there are male, and the few nude females are almost all accompanied by a male; moreover, a majority of the nude females appear to be postmenopausal. Marina Terkourafi has remarked (pc) that around the Mediterranean, topless young women are more common than naked men, but I note that the genitals are covered, so they are not nude as on Alexandria Bay.

¹⁹ Banter can occur between strangers if there is no risk of insulting the addressee, see Allan (2010, p. 2113) for an example.

²⁰ Despite Greer LJ displaying his prejudice against the ordinary man by saying ‘God forbid that the standard of manners should be taken from the man on the Clapham omnibus’. Today, we have a more demotic notion of the standard of polite manners.

²¹ Formal situations correspond to the ‘formal’ and ‘consultative’ styles of Joos (1961); my ‘colloquial’ style overlaps with his ‘casual’ and ‘intimate’ styles.

of gentlefolk in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries supplied the pattern for proper, and therefore polite, language and behaviour in Britain and its colonies, cf. Campbell (1776, I, p. 352), Withers (1789, p. 161), Leonard (1929, p. 29), Shapin (1994), Culpeper and Demmen (2011). We still describe polite behaviour as *courteous*, the meaning of which is given by the *OED* (1a) as ‘[h]aving such manners as befit the court of a prince; having the bearing of a courtly gentleman in intercourse with others; graciously polite and respectful of the position and feelings of others; kind and complaisant in conduct to others’. Today (and for a several centuries), polite behaviour, including language behaviour, has become a behaviour aspired to by that mass of the community whom I refer to in (2) as ‘middle class’ and a part of their habitus. This is the benchmark for Anglo politeness, but it does not follow that if Queen Elizabeth II is polite that she is consciously trying to be middle class, I am sure she is not; and the same is true of other speakers too—including the likes of Liam Gallagher (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liam_Gallagher). How far this benchmark, which is based on an idealization,²² extends beyond Anglo communities, I shall briefly return to in Sect. 5; however, as described here, it is adherence to a set of social norms that is broadly similar to Japanese *wakimae* defined by Sachiko Ide (1992, p. 299) as ‘sets of social norms of appropriate behaviour people have to observe in order to be polite in the society [in which] they live. One is polite only if he or she behaves in congruence with the expected norms in a certain situation, in a certain culture and society’.²³

The MCPC in (2) says that one would normally be expected to use euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dysphemistic dispreferred counterpart. Does this imply an avoidance-based understanding of politeness that renders the MCPC irrelevant to hearer-beneficial acts such as compliments and offers? Certainly not. The MCPC is a conventional means via which individuals interact during language interchange. The default norm is that social interactions are expected to be harmonious; consequently, there are social and legal sanctions against disruptive behaviour. These conditions are reflected in the MCPC which identifies a conventional means to build or maintain harmonious relations. Thus, for instance, when a sighted person offers to help an unknown blind woman across a busy street without any expectation that the favour will be returned in kind, the action is completely compatible with the MCPC, which would inspire the language used when making the offer to be orthophemistic.

²² Idealization does not devalue (im)politeness any more than the idealization of the boiling point of water as 100°C is useless because, in reality, water boils at a range of temperatures. 100° Celsius is the benchmark for the boiling point of water.

²³ One notable difference is that the MCPC is pragmatic whereas *wakimae* is, according to Ide (1989), dependent on socially obligatory grammatical choices of honorifics, etc., and thus not volitional and pragmatic. I doubt this. In Korean, which has a similar system of honorifics to Japanese, Kim (2003, p. 204 cited in Brown 2011, p. 119) claims that wives use non-honorific *panmal* (반말) to husbands 91% of the time in private, 39% of the time in public, and only 1% of the time in front of their parents-in-law—which is indubitably a volitional, pragmatic use of honorifics.

4 Inspecting Application of the MCPC

Having now deconstructed (2), I propose that the judgements of lexicographers (and many in the community at large) that the word *shit* is ‘coarse’, ‘obscene’, ‘insulting’, ‘vulgar’, ‘profane’, ‘taboo’, ‘slang’, ‘impolite’, and ‘offensive’ are based on the MCPC. If Google hits are a guide, *shit* is 34 times more common than *f(a)eces*, eight times more common than *poo*, and nearly seven times more common than the orthophemism and euphemism combined: 566 million hits (*shit*) versus 16.5 million (*f(a)eces*), versus 68 million (*poo*). This is partly a function of the exclamatory function of *shit*, its occurrence in expressions such as *shit faced*, *shit scared*, *shit a brick* etc., and its use in the drug sub-culture, but it is nonetheless striking that a supposed dysphemism is so much more frequent than the corresponding orthophemism and euphemism. Clearly, there must be many contexts in which it is acceptable to use *shit* without causing offence and without being impolite—though it is perhaps stretching a point to say that it is polite, even in (3) where AG is certainly expressing camaraderie and approbation:

- (3) BH: i was just going oh wow congratulations and <latch>
 AG: SHIT that’s great <latch>
 BH: yeah so she doesn’t really want to withdraw from everything but she’s taking that opportunity to go (WSC#DPC331:1540–1550)²⁴

In (3), ‘SHIT’ almost synonymous with the slang use of *wicked* meaning ‘very good, cool’; it is a dysphemistic locution used with an illocutionary intention that is euphemistic—a euphemistic dysphemism (Allan and Burrige 1991, 2006).²⁵ This simply reflects the fact that (im)politeness is wedded to what is spoken of, the participants and bystanders, the place, and the time period. Out of context, certain language expressions (and behaviours) are by convention judged either polite or impolite as we see from dictionaries and books of etiquette, and the criterion for such judgements is the MCPC.

Let us consider aspects of (im)polite language in (4), which is from Ch. 3 of *The Big Sleep* (Chandler 1939). The raconteur is Philip Marlowe, financially challenged Los Angeles private detective. The woman is Mrs Vivian Regan née Sternwood, daughter of a millionaire, in whose mansion these interchanges take place. This is their first meeting and they should both be abiding by the MCPC.

- (4) She had a drink. She took a swallow from it and gave me a cool level stare over the rim of the glass.
 ‘So you’re a private detective,’ she said. ‘I didn’t know they really existed, except in books. Or else they were greasy little men snooping around hotels.’
 There was nothing in that for me, so I let it drift with the current. ...
 [They discuss the fact that her husband Rusty Regan had disappeared, and Mrs Regan mistakenly assumed her father had employed Marlowe to find him.]

²⁴ WSC = Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand Texts; DPC331 is the (dialogue private) conversation number, recorded July 1991. AG and BH are both well-educated young female friends (20–24 years).

²⁵ The respective definitions of *euphemism* and *orthophemism* make the latter inappropriate.

...Mrs Regan said: ‘Well, how will you go about it then?’

‘How and when did he skip out?’

‘Didn’t Dad tell you?’

I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. ‘I don’t see what there is to be cagey about,’ she snapped. ‘And I don’t like your manners.’

‘I’m not crazy about yours,’ I said. ‘I didn’t ask to see you. You sent for me. I don’t mind your ritzing me or drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don’t mind your showing me your legs. They’re very swell legs and it’s a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don’t mind if you don’t like my manners. They’re pretty bad. I grieve over them during the long winter evenings. But don’t waste your time trying to cross-examine me.’

She slammed her glass down so hard that it slopped over on an ivory cushion. She swung her legs to the floor and stood up with eyes sparking fire and her nostrils wide. Her mouth was open and her bright teeth glared at me. Her knuckles were white.

‘People don’t talk like that to me,’ she said thickly.

The next time that they meet, both Regan and Marlowe remember and admit to being rude to one another at this meeting and, as readers, we can see why (and there is more than is presented in (4)). In a pattern that continues throughout the book, the rudeness mostly comes from Mrs Regan, though Marlowe is insolent. In this passage, she insults his profession, first by doubting that any such profession exists and then, accepting the inevitable, by claiming that private detectives are ‘greasy little men snooping around hotels’, thereby insulting Marlowe by implying that he is an unsavoury inconsequential character whose work is mostly checking on the sexual peccadilloes of people having extramarital affairs. He ignores the jibe (‘there was nothing in that for me, so I let it drift with the current’), though it perhaps contributes to his perception that Mrs Regan is ‘ritzing’ him—a perception that mostly derives from her overall behaviour towards him which is arrogant, haughty, and supercilious. She is well aware that she is his social superior and the daughter of his current employer, but she could be more gracious in her treatment of him; even though she has the disposition to be rude, she has no right to be. According to the existing social conventions, Marlowe may owe Mrs Regan more deference than he awards her, but her remarks about private detectives are insulting because they decry his social standing and malign his character—which is potentially hurtful and a face affront that performs impoliteness when both parties should be abiding by the MCPC. Note that (im)politeness is a dynamic of social interaction: like most other kinds of social interactive behaviour, an insult can be confronted, reciprocated, or ignored. If it is not unnoticed, it will probably be remembered.

Marlowe insolently fails to answer Mrs Regan’s question whether her father had informed him when Rusty had left: ‘I grinned at her with my head on one side. She flushed. Her hot black eyes looked mad. “I don’t see what there is to be cagey about”, she snapped. “And I don’t like your manners”’. Her response is to redden, look angry, and speak sharply to him; all signs of irritation and anger. She justifiably accuses him of being provocatively cagey and obliquely accuses him of being rude by saying that his manners displease her. This is directly confrontational; she is calling on him to revert to her expectations under the MCPC. He takes up the challenge by somewhat insolently defending his attitude as tit for tat. He reciprocates the complaint about Mrs Regan’s manners and objects that since she had initiated their

encounter, he was not in the position of a supplicant, but she was. He then chides her for her arrogance and castigates her behaviour by suggesting she is something of a lush and, furthermore, immodest ('I don't mind your...drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don't mind your showing me your legs'). He then, annoyingly, praises the way she looks and forgives her for thinking him bad-mannered. He even admits he is ill-mannered and pretends to be distressed by this inadequacy. But he ends with a sharp admonishment: 'don't waste your time trying to cross-examine me', which is an indirect way of telling her to shut up, an outright face threat, and indubitably impolite. Understandably, Mrs Regan's response is very angry, much more so than before, and she says 'People don't talk like that to me' which is a bald on record accusation of verbal insult.

What can we draw from this fictional interaction? The first thing I would say is that it rings true: The author has presented an interaction that the reader can believe could quite probably happen in real life. It does not matter that it did not. Raymond Chandler knows enough about human behaviour to recreate in fiction a sequence of interactions in which the participants violated the MCPC. He was, of course, building a story and certainly not concerned with matters of politeness per se, but that is exactly what makes (4) such an excellent vehicle for our discussion.

To people familiar with John Cleese and Connie Booth's *Fawlty Towers*,²⁶ it may seem odd to exemplify from it an instance of politeness, but consider (5).

- (5) [Basil Fawlty (the hotel manager) at the reception desk of Fawlty Towers.]
 Basil *(on the phone)* One double room without bath for the 16th, 17th and 18th...yes, and if you'd be so good as to confirm by letter?...thank you so much, goodbye. *(puts the phone down)*
 Sybil *(bustling in)* Have you made up the bill for room twelve, Basil?
 Basil No, I haven't yet, no.
 Sybil Well, they're in a hurry. Polly says they didn't get their alarm call. And Basil, please get that picture up—it's been there for a week. *(goes into office)*
 (Cleese and Booth 1988, p. 3)

This is the opening of the episode 'A touch of class' (first broadcast in September 1975) and it finds Basil, later revealed to be an economically unsuccessful, rude, misanthropic, cowardly bully, being polite (or, at least, politic) to a client who has made a phone booking. It fits the contemporary hotel script by seeking confirmation of the room type and dates, while asking for written confirmation of the booking. It ends with a conventional statement of gratitude; and although the 'thank you so much' instead of *thank you very much* is a trifle gushy, it does not overstep the acceptable bounds of correct behaviour for a polite/politic interchange with a stranger. Governed by the MCPC this initial sequence of utterances by Basil Fawlty is polite. On the first appearance of his termagant wife,²⁷ Sybil speaks sharply to him; yet although implicitly issuing a directive, she is also politic if not polite. The only mark of her disdain for him is the use of his name rather than an endearment, which adds

²⁶ For background, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fawlty_Towers.

²⁷ Sybil is variously described dysphemistically by Basil in later episodes as a 'sour old rat', 'puff-adder', 'dragon', 'piranha fish', 'nest of vipers', 'sabre-toothed tart', and 'rancorous, coiffured old sow'.

a hard edge to the question. But late-twentieth-century behaviour between husbands and wives permits relaxation of the constraints of the MCPC: Remember that the MCPC is an idealized benchmark against which the analyst will compare instances of behaviour in real life or in fiction. Between husband and wife, the lack of social difference, and in the late-twentieth century also a lack of power differential, allows for greater directness and expectation of mutual imposition than is normal between casual acquaintances. This makes Basil's negative response explicable, though he could have softened it with an apology and/or explanation, as in *No, I'm sorry, I haven't had time to do it yet, I've been....* This would have lowered the potential antagonism between the spouses. Sybil's response is utterly reasonable. The first two sentences explain Sybil's previous question and indirectly demand that the bill be made up quickly. There is also an implied criticism in 'they didn't get their alarm call'; we recognise that it is probably an accusation against Basil for not giving the occupants of room 12 their alarm call, and this is later justified when Basil apologises to them for just this oversight. The final sentence is a nice example of hectoring—or at least its onset—in the criticism of Basil for failing to hang 'that picture' during the previous week. Do we judge Sybil to be being impolite here? Not really, although she does adopt a recognisably domineering tone, which becomes a hallmark of their relationship. Sybil is Basil's wife and she makes it clear that she disapproves the failures she detects in him. If we rely on our expectations of what the running of a nondescript low-star hotel would require, we cannot judge her criticisms unwarranted. The fact that her linguistic expression is domineering rather than deferential and respectful is part of the authors' deliberate characterisation of her persona. As I have said, I do not believe this makes us judge her as impolite. Once again, Watts' term *politic behaviour* is useful for behaviour that is not impolite even if it seems barely acceptable to refer to it as polite.

My comments on the (im)politeness in (4) were based on the reported judgements of the participants as well as my own observations, although the participants cannot be interrogated (they are fictional and author is dead); this is consistent with Haugh 2007. My comments on the (im)politeness in (5) have no direct sanction from the participants, yet I believe they are justified, even though another observer could take a different view. If that were to happen, it would arise from a different interpretation of the text in (5) in the light of what may also be a different interpretation of the MCPC. All interpretations of (im)politeness are subject to individual variation as the result of differing experiences and beliefs—differences in individual habitus. This does not invalidate the MCPC which describes a socialized, largely untaught, convention that serves as a benchmark for intuitions of (im)politeness. One might compare the differences in individual habitus to individual differences in language use and understanding: something that only rarely leads to communication breakdown. There is enough flexibility in our understanding of ourselves and others to allow for social interaction to proceed uninterrupted by dispute even when the ideas and beliefs of the participants diverge.

Finally, consider the content of an email I received out of the blue in May 2012 with the subject line ‘hello from OUP’. It reads as in (6):²⁸

(6) Dear Prof. Allan,
 Hello. I’m the linguistics editor for OUP in the US. Cynthia Read and I were talking about your 1991 book with us, *Euphemism and Dysphemism*, and how your work has held up well over the years. I understand you’re editing an Oxford Handbook for my colleagues in the UK. If that’s not sapping all your time, I’d be eager to hear about your latest projects. Perhaps there could be a revised an[d] expanded (and even re-titled) *Euphemism and Dysphemism* at some point.
 Best wishes,
 Brian
 [Signature with full name and contact details]

I do not know whether Watts would regard this email as displaying politic behaviour or polite behaviour, but my own reaction was that it is polite. I shall explain why. This was a note from someone (Brian) with whom I was completely unacquainted, so he addressed me in a formal/consultative fashion with my title + surname, yet—with an informal nuance—he abbreviated *Professor* to ‘Prof.’. The writer then uses a conversational style greeting, immediately followed by an identifying description. In order to establish some human common ground, this is immediately followed by a reference to Cynthia Read, a previous linguistics editor at OUP New York, the person responsible for commissioning and aiding in the publication of *Euphemism and Dysphemism* (Allan and Burridge 1991) and with whom I have maintained cordial relations over the years. Brian then appeals to what Brown and Levinson would call my positive face by (flatteringly and hyperbolically) praising the longevity of the 1991 book and then showing that he is aware of a more recent project of mine with OUP (a handbook on the history of linguistics, Allan 2013a). This is a means of dwelling on my ties with OUP and, by extension, with the writer himself as linguistics editor for OUP New York. Brian next attends to my negative face (‘if it’s not sapping all your time’), which functions as an implicit apology for asking me to take the time to respond to his email by telling him of my upcoming projects. Here, he pays attention to my positive face once again, because of the implication that such projects may potentially be of interest as a publishing opportunity for OUP. Part of the common ground evoked here is that OUP is a highly prestigious publisher. From a politeness perspective, the final sentence is interesting. It continues the flattering suggestion that OUP is interested in publishing my work²⁹ by suggesting a revised, expanded edition of *Euphemism and Dysphemism*. At the same time it is subtly hinted by the parenthetical ‘and even retitled’ that a different title might improve marketability: because this implies a mild criticism of the old title, it is very tentative and its face-threatening potential is reduced to the absolute minimum; I cannot think of a way it could be further mitigated other than by not mentioning it

²⁸ Published with permission. For the reader who does not already know, OUP=Oxford University Press.

²⁹ In fact *Euphemism and Dysphemism* was co-authored with Kate Burridge who would, of course, collaborate in any revision. There is no slight to Kate in Brian’s email, and for the sake of simplicity I am concentrating on my own part in the venture. Forgive me, Kate.

at all—which is not really an option if OUP is proposing to reissue a revised version of the book under a new title. Finally, I note a standard well-wishing farewell, and an informal friendly first name only sign off, followed by a formal signature with appropriate contact details.

Brian certainly abided by the MCPC in his email, and yet moved towards camaraderie by his quasi-conversational style and by establishing common ground for our interaction at a personal level and paying attention to my positive face while carefully mitigating any statement that might be even slightly face threatening.

5 Conclusion

Sentences are not *ipso facto* polite, nor are languages more or less polite. It is only speakers who are polite, and then only if their utterances reflect an adherence to the obligations they carry in that particular conversation. (Fraser 1990, p. 233)

The ‘obligations’ that Fraser refers to are, for Anglos, those defined in (2). I have discussed (im)politeness in some detail in the course of this chapter. One thing I have not done is differentiated two different approaches to politeness (Watts, Ide and Ehlich (eds) 1992; Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Terkourafi 2011, 2012): ‘politeness1’, or lay notions of politeness; and ‘politeness2’, the object of inquiry in social and linguistic theory that delivers an analytical perspective on politeness1. As Terkourafi points out, the interesting target of inquiry is politeness1 (perhaps explained via politeness2), and politeness1 is what I assume the MCPC applies to—though the MCPC itself, as described in (2), falls under politeness2. It seems certain that face concerns have consequences for (im)politeness, so I presented an account of face that dispenses with objections to the Brown and Levinson account, emphasizing the importance of social identity rather than individual identity, and thus favouring an account of face work that is close to Spencer-Oatey’s concept of rapport management. Nonetheless, I found it useful when discussing text (6) to make recourse to the Brown and Levinson notions of positive and negative face.

(Im)politeness is a set of dispositions that govern social interaction within a social group (community of practice) that render an act undertaken in a particular context appropriate or inappropriate according to the normal standards of behaviour within that group, which serve to establish criteria for assessing (im)politeness. (Im)politeness is therefore a set of conventional behaviours and a manifestation of habitus. Although this has been widely recognized for decades, the criteria underlying intuitions about what is polite or impolite, although discussed, remained undefined in the literature until the MCPC was proposed in Allan and Burridge (1991). The MCPC as defined in (2) is a frame or cultural script: a benchmark for behaviour.

In this chapter, I have deconstructed the MCPC and explained its components. The MCPC names social constraints on the use of language. X-phemisms indicate aspects of (im)politeness. The use of orthophemisms seems to equate with Watts’ ‘politic behaviour’, which is not impolite and will often be described in ordinary discourse as ‘polite’. Politic behaviour is typically unmarked whereas euphemism

and dysphemism tend to indicate marked language, which is why Watts described them as (typically) salient.

A limitation of the MCPC is that it is a default criterion which works well for decontextualized language, but—being an idealization—it cannot directly apply to the particular circumstances of an interaction in which participants and situations do not match those stated in (2). We observed some of this in the discussion of (5). The MCPC is a benchmark for behaviour: an ideal or abstraction—like Chomsky’s ideal speaker–hearer. Serving as a benchmark, the MCPC is not in practice restricted in application merely to male+female dyads, nor to adults, nor to those from the middle class: The working-class characters in the British sitcom *The Royle Family*³⁰ utilize the MCPC and, from what I know, so does Queen Elizabeth II.

Another limitation is that the MCPC is not obviously applicable across space and time to all language communities. (Im)politeness as a means of managing (aspects of) social interaction is apparent in all communities. In the dictionaries of languages other than English, lexicographers make the same kind of judgements about the (im)politeness of certain words and phrases as those that led us to postulate the MCPC. Where do their intuitions come from? Where do the judgements of (im)politeness come from in works such as Matsumoto (1988), Ide (1989), Matsumoto (1989; Japanese), Gu (1990), Mao (1994), Lee-Wong (2000; Chinese), Sifianou (1992, 2011; Greek), Terkourafi (2001; Cypriot Greek), Ruhi (2007; Turkish)? The answer is: some counterpart to the MCPC which, though its constituents will be different in particulars, will name social constraints on the use of language that are designed to maintain harmonious social relations within the community. I have already noted the similarity between the MCPC and Japanese *wakimae* as described in Ide (1992) and elsewhere; this is not to claim they are the same notion but rather counterparts in different sociocultural systems that entail different conditions (for instance, Japanese politeness is more affected by a demonstrable respect that needs to be shown to others along with a humbling of self than is the norm in Anglo societies, cf. Haugh 2004, inter alios). Closer comparison of the MCPC with accounts of (im)politeness in non-Anglo communities and figuring out criteria by which adjustments are made on the fly to the MCPC in interactions where real participants and situations do not match those idealized in (2), I leave for future research.³¹

³⁰ Created by Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Royle_Family.

³¹ At the University of Cape Town, Patience Mususa seconded by Ana Deumert drew my attention to the difference between respect and politeness. Certainly, they are different concepts, but the demonstration of behavioural and linguistic respect or disrespect (where appropriate) are, I believe, judged polite and impolite, respectively. But there is more to be said on this topic.

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