

## **Book Review**

Kádár, D. Z. (2017). *Politeness, impoliteness and ritual: Maintaining the moral order in interpersonal interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [pp. xx + 263; ISBN: 978-1107052185].

The mission of this book is ‘to model the relationship that exists between (im)politeness and ritual’ (p. 220). The book has a long detailed preface, an introduction, and then two parts. Part I Ritual and (Im)Politeness: The Basic Relationship comprises three chapters: ‘Ritual: Its Definition, Typology, and Relational Role(s)’; ‘Ritual and Politeness Research’; ‘Ritual Action and (Im)Polite Evaluation: The Basic Relationship’. Part II Ritual, (Im)Politeness, and Moral Aggression has 4 chapters: ‘Rites of Moral Aggression’; ‘Ritual, Aggression, and Voicing the Moral Order(s)’; ‘Ritual, Responsibility, and the Moral Order(s)’; ‘Conclusion’. Part II includes several unnecessary repetitions (pp. 183, 185-6, 187-8, 189, 192, 193) of long examples from Part I without substantial additional comment, which is puzzling and annoying. However, by and large the book is easy to read and though it succeeds in modelling the relationship between (im)politeness (i.e. both politeness and impoliteness) and ritual, it does not demonstrate that this brings a novel understanding of (im)politeness nor of ritual, nor of human social behaviour more generally.

Politeness is described as follows.

Politeness is not limited to conventional acts of linguistic etiquette . . . . [I]t covers something much broader, encompassing all types of interpersonal behaviour through which we take into account the feelings of others as to how they think they should be treated in working out and maintaining our sense of personhood as well as our interpersonal relationships with others. (p. 7, quoting Kádár & Haugh, 2013, p. 1)

There is an assumption that the reader will recognize politeness and impoliteness without the need for definition of what they are (as is attempted in Allan, 2015). The author of the present book, K[ádár], recognizes that there are culturally differing notions of (im)politeness, comparing e.g. Ide’s notion of *wakimae* (Ide, 1989, 1992), which K glosses as ‘discernment’ of one’s social standing relative to others,<sup>1</sup> with the notion of politeness familiar from Brown and Levinson’s 1987 work. Although K does allude to the fact that politeness in medieval times was not what it is today (p. 76) he ignores the fact that less than a century ago, (im)politeness norms in the novels of the England-based Bloomsbury group were much closer to *wakimae* than they are today.

Consequently, the manners regarded as polite in previous centuries sometimes seem ridiculously pedantic today and if practised in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be inappropriate. For instance, Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* has the following interchange between aunt and niece:

"How, Miss Western," said the aunt "have you the assurance to speak of him in this manner, to own your affection for such a villain, to my face!"  
 "Sure, madam," said Sophia. (Fielding, 1749, p. XVII.8)

Such formality, at least towards older generation family members, was common among English speakers until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (and perhaps later in some parts of the United States). Politeness is sensitive to social standing. In Fielding's novel, the two lady's maids of Sophia and her supposedly more sophisticated aunt have a tiff, which leads the latter to assert her superiority through 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, p. VII.8)

In response to all this, K might well say that different rituals are expected and performed at different points in the history of one culture as well as across cultures, and we'd have to agree.

But what is ritual, for K? He seems to have got the idea from Goffman 1955, 1967, 1974, though he has his own take on it.

Ritual is a formalised and recurrent action, which is relationship forcing; that is, by operating, it reinforces/transforms interpersonal relationships. Ritual is realised as an embedded liminal (mini)performance, and this performance is bound to relational history (and related moral order), or historicity in general (and related moral order). Ritual is an emotively invested action, as anthropological research has shown. (p. 12)

In other words 'ritual is an interactionally salient action, which transforms and/or reinforces interpersonal relationships' (p. 1), hence it is 'liminal' (pp. 6-7). Like (im)politeness, ritual is performed: it is formalized social action that 'embodies a social group's practice' (p. 4). Ritual is performed according to 'scripts': although not accredited, these seem to be the scripts, i.e. dynamic event sequences, proposed by Schank 1982, 1984, 1986, Schank and Abelson 1977, e.g. 'for example, inviting a person whom one finds attractive to the cinema or to dinner is a typical sexual rite of courting, while proposing to the other to 'come outside' in a pub can be a rite of challenge that precedes a fight' (p. xv).

The conditions on (im)polite behaviour often make reference to (sub)cultural

conventions. But K eschews conventions in favour of ritual. At least in part, this arises from an idiosyncratic notion of convention not based (as is perhaps customary) on Lewis 1969:

Convention is primarily carried out for the benefit of the interactants, while the *raison d'être* for ritual is to be carried out in front of an audience other than the interactants themselves; that is why ritual is a performance . . . which constitutes one's face for either a real or imaginary audience . . . .

Conventions tend to be salient (or 'marked') only for those who are outside the group/culture in which the convention operates . . . .

Conventions are only loosely constrained by context, while rituals can only take place at certain times and places. This is again because ritual represents an action that actively maintains the perceived moral order of a person or a community, and so it is temporally and spatially situated. (p. 87)

I would dispute that conventions are performed only for the interactants while rituals are for the benefit of an audience (which apparently can be 'imaginary' and therefore non-existent). Second, if conventions are salient only to an out-group, surely the same is true of ritual? Finally, if context is not in part defined on time and place, how does K conceive it? These constraints make K sound like Humpty-Dumpty. In my view (based on Lewis 1969, p. 78), a convention is a regularity of behaviour to which, in a given situation almost everyone within a population conforms and expects almost everyone else to conform. Moreover, almost everyone prefers this state of affairs to an alternative. This is not to say that the convention is immutable: if people cease to conform to a particular regularity and prefer to cease to conform to it, it will cease to remain a convention; and if they gradually adopt another regularity in behaviour, this will become a convention when almost everyone in the population conforms to it and almost everyone prefers this state of affairs to the alternative. The rituals that K identifies in his book are regularities in behaviour, though the population maybe limited to just one or two people. This being so, I do not find that the invocation of 'ritual' throws new light on the discussion of (im)politeness.

K introduces the term 'fringing'—the strategic modification of language to cause a(n) (im)polite effect; 'engaging in fringing requires *extra interactional effort* rather than simply performing a ritual, although . . . the effort to politely fringe a destructive relational ritual action is often regarded as normative' (p. 19, italics his). I don't know why this new term is introduced when terms such as 'mitigation' and 'strategic modification' seem to cover the same ground (see also p. 58). To be 'exempt [from] fringing strategies' (p. 57) is to be what

Brown and Levinson refer to as ‘bald on record’. There is a link between (im)politeness and morality: ‘polite fringing tends to be regarded essentially as a moral form of behaviour, while impolite fringing tends to be interpreted as immoral (p. 112).

What is potentially interesting in K’s book is the discussion of ‘moral order’ and ‘moral aggression’. These are discussed in relation to heckling as aggression (pp. 141-2) and bystander intervention when the moral order is perceived to be violated plus the responses to both kinds of events. A heckler disturbs a public speaker/performer with an unratified interruption—which constitutes aggression against the moral order (p. 29)<sup>2</sup>. I found all the examples of heckling in chapter 5 (pp. 148-156) completely unrevealing with respect to the book’s theme: they do demonstrate different responses to heckling, but there is no nice set of behaviour categories revealed. With bystander intervention ‘morality itself is [often] visibly voiced, with the goal to reinforce perceived and often conflicting moral orders’ (p. 179)—both parties believe themselves to be morally right (p. 191). But again, there is nothing new uncovered.

Before I conclude, I’ll list a few minor gripes:

1. K appears to misunderstand Grice’s cooperative principle when he writes:
 

politeness can be interpreted as flouting of the Cooperative Principle, which stipulates that one needs to interact in the most efficient way. For example, being indirect means that one has to compromise the efficiency of a given utterance, but this flouting of the CP is assumed to trigger polite inferences if it follows patterns through which the recipient/hearer can infer the producer’s/speaker’s polite intention. (p. 84)
2. Politeness is NOT ipso facto inefficient communication.
3. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 (pp. 113-114) should be accompanied by examples of what K means by ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ comments.
4. It is not stated who translated ex. (7.6) p. 212, and I recommend the reader check <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pohifad23S8> in addition to what K suggests.
5. Finally, there are some annoying typos: the title is given as ‘*Ritual, Politeness and Impoliteness*’ instead of *Politeness, Impoliteness and Ritual* (p. i); ‘Sterling’ for Stirling (p. 98); ‘S = Server’ for W = Waitress (or vice versa) (p. 158); ‘Natile’ for Natalie (p. 161); there is an extraneous persona ‘Mean Customer’ (p. 163); ‘other form of `regulation’ means what? (p. 203).

As this review makes clear, I have been disappointed with *Politeness, Impoliteness and Ritual*. I'm sorry, but it puts me in mind of the emperor's new clothes.

#### Notes:

1. Ide (1992, p. 299) identifies it as 'sets of social norms of appropriate behavior 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.' According to Ide (1989), *wakimae* depends on socially obligatory grammatical choices of honorifics, etc. and is thus not volitional and pragmatic. I doubt this. In Korean, which has a similar system of honorifics to Japanese, Kim (2003, p. 204 as 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. It seems K would agree, see p. 81.
2. On p. 173 K claims that an accidental cough counts as heckling: it may be an interruption and the culprit may apologise, but it is not heckling, nor aggressive—as noisily clearing a throat might well be.

Reviewed by Keith ALLAN  
Monash University and the University of Queensland

#### *The Author*

Keith Allan (Email: [keith.allan@monash.edu](mailto:keith.allan@monash.edu)) is Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at Monash University. He was a recipient of the Centenary Medal for Service to Australian Society and the Humanities in Linguistics and Philology in 2003. Keith's research interests focus mainly on aspects of meaning in language, with a secondary interest in the history and philosophy of linguistics. He is Editor of *The Australian Journal of Linguistics* and on the boards of *Language Sciences*, *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Empirical Foundations of Theoretical Pragmatics*. Keith has published on the topics of censorship, discourse analysis, dysphemism, euphemism, grammaticalization, jargon, language policy, linguistic metatheory, morphology, politeness, pragmatics, prosody, psycho-linguistics, semantics, sociolinguistics, speech act theory, syntax, and taboo. His books include *Linguistic Meaning* (1986); *Euphemism and Dysphemism: Language Used as Shield and Weapon* (with Kate Burridge, 1991); *Natural Language Semantics* (2001); *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the*

*Censoring of Language* (with Kate Burridge, 2006); *Concise Encyclopaedia of Semantics* (2009, editor); *The Western Classical Tradition in Linguistics* [second expanded edition] (2010, first edition 2007); *The English Language and Linguistics Companion* (with Julie Bradshaw et al. 2010); *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics* (with Kasia Jaszczolt, 2012); *Saliency and Defaults in Utterance Processing* (with Kasia Jaszczolt, 2012); *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics* (2012, editor); *Routledge Handbook of Linguistics* (in press, editor).

## References

- Allan, K. (2015). A benchmark for politeness. In Jacob L. Mey & A. Capone (Eds.), *Interdisciplinary studies in pragmatics, culture and society* (pp. 397-420). Cham: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-12616-6\_15
- Brown, L. (2011). Korean honorifics and 'revealed', 'ignored' and 'suppressed' aspects of Korean culture and politeness. In F. Bargiela-Chiappini & D. Z. Kádár (Eds.), *Politeness across cultures* (pp. 106-127.). Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fielding, H. (1749). *The history of Tom Jones, a foundling*. London: printed for A. Millar.
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 18, 213-31. Reprinted in J. Laver & S. Hutcheson (Eds.) *Communication in face to face interaction* (pp. 319-63). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8, 223-248.
- Ide, S. (1992). On the notion of wakimae: Toward an integrated framework of linguistic politeness. In Mejiro Linguistics Society (Ed.), *Kotoba no Mozaiku [Mosaic of Language: Essays in Honor of Professor Natsuko Okuda]* (pp. 298-305). Tokyo: Mejiro Linguistics Society.

- Kádár, D. Z., & Haugh, M. (2013). *Understanding politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, H. (2003). Young couples' communication in changing Korea. *Modern Studies in English Language and Literature*, 4 (3), 197-217.
- Lewis, D. (1969). *Convention*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schank, R. (1982). *Dynamic memory: A theory of reminding and learning in computers and people*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schank, R. (1984). *The cognitive computer*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Schank, R. (1986). *Explanation patterns*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Schank, R., & Abelson, R. C. (1977). *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding: An inquiry into human knowledge structures*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.