

## **BUSINESS PRAGMATICS: WHY ARE WE BEING POLITE?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

For many of those who were brought up to ‘say please and thank you’ and were taught to ‘hold the door for the person behind,’ politeness was a ‘compulsory component’ of what was once considered to be a good man’s character. In those days, attempting to be ‘polite merely on the surface’ could end up being scolded by one’s parents, if not being remonstrated or immediately looked down upon as hypocrites by peers or even by business partners. Yet today, politeness in business has become more of a forced phenomenon of mutual concession, a pragmatic means to an end, or even a new form of reciprocal comity resulting from the inevitable mutual co-existence and quests for sustainability of nations, let alone international trade and relations. But when did politeness escape from the self and evolved to become a business phenomenon? Could it be triggered by a series of trade related or historical events or was it simply naturally evolving? Did researchers notice this in the course of human history? What would be the next phase of business politeness research? In this paper, we shall attempt to look at business politeness from the historical perspective of global business trends (including trade, world population, etc.) starting with the early eighteenth century as well as study the possible implications, and hence its future developments.

Keywords: Business pragmatics, politeness, interpersonal relations

## INTRODUCTION

### A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF POLITENESS

The word ‘politeness’ first appeared<sup>1</sup> in 1528, some twenty-five years after the Battle of Cerignola<sup>2</sup> in 1503 in which modern gun power was known to have been used for first time in the history of mankind (Mallet & Shaw, 2012, p.64). The word ‘politeness’ was never a common or fashion word during those days, not at least for another three hundred years. Then, in the eighteenth-century, the notion of ‘politeness’ started to become something fashionable in England (Nevalainen & Tissari, 2010, pp.133-158). The era, still characterized by the ‘zero-sum philosophy’ of trade mercantilism resulting from the various ‘reminisce on war’, was being revived<sup>3</sup> by the more cooperative and embracing positive-sum ideas in trade practices advocated by Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Politeness, then a buzzword for ‘metropolitan sociability’ (Keen, 2012; Klein, 1994, p.11), referred to the ideal of how gentlemen should converse and display themselves in members-only clubs and upper-class taverns (Parolin, 2010, pp. 276-277) and how ladies should behave and act demurely in grand theatres (Russell, 2007). And, with the world population having reached its 1 billionth mark in the early 1800 (see Figure 1), the need for international trade intensified and the notion of politeness involving only the self was gradually replaced by the ‘absolute standard of prescriptivism and correctness’ (Stein & Tieken-Boon van Ostade, 1994). Such a new standard led to the emergence of ‘polite English’ among business people (Fitzmauricea, 1998), though at the cost of deviating from the old ideal of the self to merely a display in a material context (p.309) within a group.

As both local and international trade volumes continued to expand since the late nineteenth century (and hence contact and communication between and among people), the need for ‘polite business English’ rose drastically as well, particularly in the early twentieth century (in 1948) after the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was signed. What previously considered to be conventional methods of business liaison had changed from the strictly face-to-face, ‘in-person’ handshaking deals that relied heavily on the trustworthiness, integrity and the social behavior of the self to the written, contract-based, ‘on-paper’ (i.e. black-and-white) style of communications that involved the interpretation of semiotic meaning and critical understanding of knowledge in written text and discourse. The subject of being able to provide truthful (in terms of quality), sufficient (in terms of quantity), relevant (in terms of relation) and clear (in terms of manner) business information in trade deals became more crucial than ever, especially after the two world wars, and hence, echoed remotely with the study of the four Gricean maxims<sup>4</sup> (Grice, 1975 [1967]) later in the 1960s. Meanwhile, having been through the morrows of wars and economic setbacks throughout the late nineteenth to early twentieth century<sup>5</sup>, avoiding further military conflicts and cooperating mutually on an international basis topped the priority lists of many recovering economies. The discussion of ‘conflict avoidance’ (Lakoff, 1973; 1977) as a ‘means of minimizing the risk of confrontation in discourse’ (1989, p.102) is, in the writer's opinion, an excellent reflection of the diplomatic scenario of the time as well as the on-going efforts made in maintaining a peaceful, growing and sustainable global economy in retrospect (see Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> According to DuFon et al. (1994), the earliest book on politeness in the Western tradition is *Libro del Cortegiano* [English translation: *The Book of the Courtier*. Harmondsworth: Penguin] by Castiglione Baldesar, published in 1528.

<sup>2</sup> Spain defeated France at the Battle of Cerignola in 1503, marking a near invincible Spanish dominance on European battlefields until the defeat of Rocroi in 1643 which marked the rise of shot tactics.

<sup>3</sup> A school of thought dominating Europe since the late Renaissance to the early modern period (i.e. 15th to the 18th century) was ‘mercantilism’ in which trade is depicted as a ‘zero-sum game’ with only one side either loses or wins in a two-party trade deal. The concept was eventually replaced by Adam Smith's Theory of Absolute Advantage in his *Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 and eventually the ‘positive-sum game concept’ – in which both trade parties can benefit simultaneously from any trade deals (see Theory of Comparative Advantage) by David Ricardo in *Principles of Political Economy*, in 1817. See Brezis, Elise S. (2003), ‘Mercantilism’, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> The four Gricean maxims (Grice, 1975 [1967]) are quality, quantity, relation and manner.

<sup>5</sup> The wars and economic setbacks include the Great Depression (1929, till the 1940s), the two World Wars (WWI: 1914-1918, WWII: 1939-1945), Korean War (1950-1953) and Vietnam War (1959-1975), plus many other regional conflicts involving the use of military and armed forces.

With a relatively peaceful and conflict-avoiding global atmosphere, politeness research in the 1980s took a major shift of focus as the international community started to reap the fruits of some two decades of the global economy flying full-throttled (note: refer to the sharp rise in global GDP from 1960 to 1980 in Figure 2). English as lingua franca language for communication, particularly in computer-mediated forms (CMC), reached its all-time peak since the beginning of globalization since the third millennium (Frank, 1998). Cross-culture politeness concepts (Brown & Levinson, 1978; 1987) that were built upon the earlier and less popular notion of face (Goffman, 1967) then managed to secure their places in mainstream discussions as they flourished with the economy. Yet despite alleged caution<sup>6</sup> (Watts, 1989) and criticisms from non-Western researchers, e.g. Japan (Ide, 1989), China (Gu, 1990), and Nigeria (Nwoye, 1992), such kind of cross-culture universal politeness frameworks did not give way, at least not until after the millennium, when multilingual computing<sup>7</sup> systems developed for general commercial use were made widely available (e.g. multilingual platforms as in Microsoft® Windows 2000™ and onwards). These new computing technologies effectively challenged the English-dominated way of electronic information dissemination since the invention of the telegram (with codes only in English) and the appearing of real-time news (also mainly in English) in the early 1850s<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 1.** Evolution of politeness and the global environment

PERIOD	HOW WAS POLITENESS INTERPRETED?	BACKGROUND	WORLD POPULATION
1528-1700	The term 'politeness' appeared in history for the first time in <i>Libro del Cortegiano</i> by Castiglione Baldesar, published 1528. Politeness was thought to be something like 'let's not fight, be polite.'	Twenty-five years after the first battle was known in history to have fought with gun power. This is the era during which the zero-sum 'Merchantilism' prevailed.	Less than 1 billion
1800	A fashionable buzzword and term for 'metropolitan sociability': the ideal for the gentlemen and the proper act or behavior for the ladies. Politeness is only kept for the self.	Adam Smith's Theory of Absolute Advantage in his <i>Wealth of Nations</i> published in 1776.	Around 1 billion
1800-1900	Politeness of the self was replaced by an 'absolute standard of prescriptivism and correctness'. Business people started to use 'polite English' in trade. Display politeness in a material context within a group appeared.	Need for international trade and communications between people intensified.	Well over the 1 billion mark, approaching close to two billion.
1960's	Paul Grice's 'Cooperative Principle': provide truthful (in terms of quality), sufficient (in terms of quantity), relevant (in terms of relation) and clear (in terms of manner) business information in trade.	Post-World War I and II. Battles were still on-going and people expected information to be accurate and precise because it could be a matter of life and death.	2.5 billion

<sup>6</sup> Researchers such as Richard Watts (1989) had taken a relatively cautious stance on the question of culture. He stressed as early as in the 1990s that culture should not be treated as a normative concept, and that there should not be "strict and proper rules" of politeness in the cultures of British, Japanese, and Chinese etc.

<sup>7</sup> The Unicode for Windows, first developed in early 1990s, was first made available on Windows 95/NT platforms in 1997. The codes include among others Cyrillic, Greek, Armenian, Hebrew, Arabic, Thai, Bengali, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean and Japanese fonts.

<sup>8</sup> The fall of prices in telegraphy, as a result of the U.S. telegraph bubbles (i.e. over-investment in cable wires across America) in the 1840s and 1850s, gave birth to real-time news agencies (e.g. Associated Press in 1846) and the introduction of the telegraphic transfer (or "wire transfer") (e.g. Western Union in 1851)

1970's	Lack of brevity and directness will be a sign of politeness. Lakoff suggested the three rules of 'Conflict Avoidance': (a) distance (prominent among the British), (b) deference (among Japanese), and (c) camaraderie (among Australian)	The era of the Cold War (1945-1989) – the world was trying to avoid a WWII as it slowly walks out of the shadows of WWI and WWII.	3.5 billion
1980's	Brown and Levinson's Universalistic Framework: politeness includes the notion of 'face' and is a 'redressive' act bearing cultural differences. Positive face is used when one wishes to be appreciated by others whereas 'negative politeness' is employed when face is threatened.	Per capita GDP increases in full speed; global economy fully throttled, see Figure 2. People started to enjoy the fruit of economic success – face.	4.5 billion
1990's	Criticism from various cultures: Everyone argues (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto & Ekman, 1989; Nwoye, 1992) that they don't protect 'face' the way Brown and Levinson said they do. Cultural differences in terms of how people comprehend politeness should be considered.	End of Cold War. Rise of awareness of civil and human rights. Rise of computer mediated communications; social media, human rights.	Over 5 billion
After 2000	Notion of 'culture' abandoned (Eelen, 2001) and politeness is now interpreted independently and critically from the angles of each and every individual.	Rising population goes quickly with individualism (Twenge, Campbell, Gentile, 2012).	About 6 billion

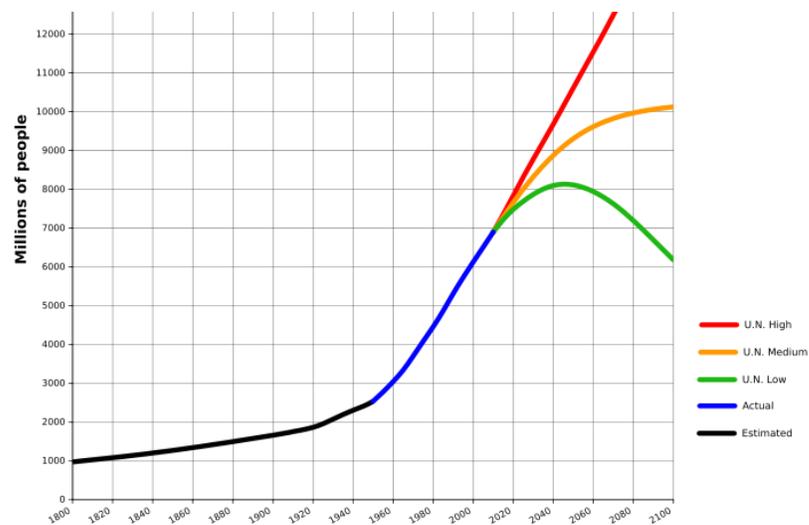


Figure 1. World population estimates and projections<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The population estimates (black line) from 1800 to 1950 were taken from the US Census Bureau historical estimates, see <http://www.census.gov/population/international/> whereas the world population projections 2010 to 2100 were based on UN 2010 projections (red, orange, green lines), for details see [http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel\\_population.htm](http://esa.un.org/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm)

### Per Capita GDP by World Region 1820 - 2003 (1990 Int'l Dollars)

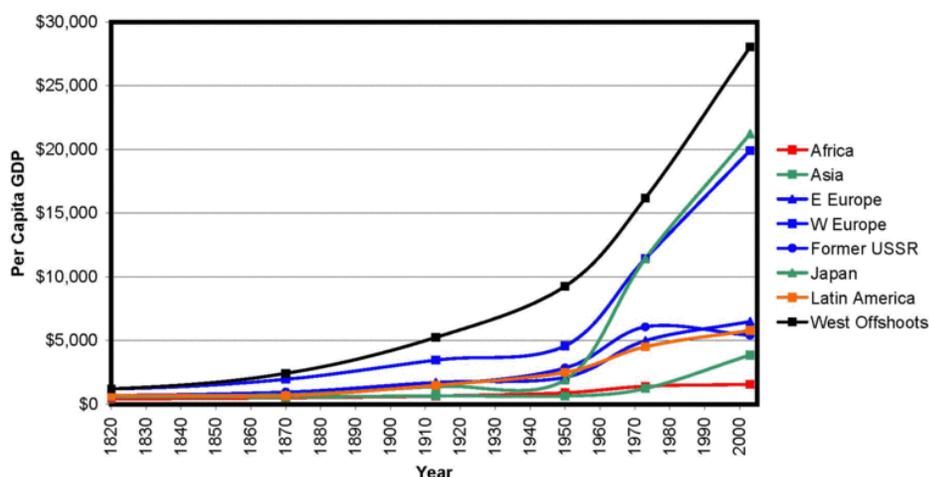


Figure 2. Per Capita GDP by World Region<sup>10</sup>

The post-millennium era, during which the old universal trade rules from the 1980s were starting to find themselves incapable of concluding the decade-long, most tumultuous Doha round of trade talks<sup>11</sup> in the history of GATT and the World Trade Organization (WTO), was equally marked by a new yet strikingly similar ‘discursive school’ of politeness research (Eelen, 2001) in which generalizing cross-cultural statements developed from within the last two decades were quick to become dead-ends for politeness studies (Kádár & Mills, 2011), just as some scholars (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Nwoye, 1992; Watts, 1989) had previously anticipated. This new ‘discursive school’, in fact, also gained support from many other eminent researchers (Bousfield, 2008; Locher, 2004; Locher & Watts, 2008; Mills, 2003; Terkourafi, 2005; Watts, 2003) as it not only abandoned the old notion of culture (Eelen, 2001, p.173) but also tactically differentiates the different interpretations of politeness by appreciating them critically from the angles of each and every one of the participants. Such a new direction of thinking reminds us of exactly how the WTO members have each been debating and fighting for their own ‘policy space’ (as separate groups) according to their own domestic and political needs, in the current but seemingly never-ending Doha round of talks that commenced already over a decade ago in 2001 (see also note 9).

Indeed, what defines politeness varies with time and how it is defined differs not only with the situation and the type of discourse (Locher, 2004; Mills, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 2005; Watts, 2003), but also the global

<sup>10</sup> Image source: Angus Maddison, ‘Contours of the World Economy, 1-2030 A.D. Essays in Macro-Economic History.’ New York. Oxford University Press, 2007. Copyright © Michael W Kruse

<sup>11</sup> 123 countries, including the European Communities and some 75 GATT members (countries that have signed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), founded the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995 after the Uruguay round of trade talks that spanned from 1986 to 1994 (totaling 87 months). The Doha round of talks, commenced in 2001 and has yet to conclude, is the longest round in GATT/WTO history that involves standardizing tariffs, non-tariff measures, agriculture, labor standards, environment, competition, investment, transparency, patents etc. among 141 to-be WTO members and is one that has been criticized as bad for development and interfered excessively with countries’ domestic ‘policy space.’ See Accra’s (2008) ‘Statement by civil society organizations on the WTO negotiating situation, and on food and financial crises,’ see [http://www.twinside.org.sg/statements/WTO.NGO.statement.at.Accra\\_Comments\\_version\\_5.doc](http://www.twinside.org.sg/statements/WTO.NGO.statement.at.Accra_Comments_version_5.doc)

atmosphere, the economy, the language, the culture (Beeching, 2002; Hickey & Steward, 2005; Placencia & Garcia, 2006). Yet what truly fuels the direction behind is the dire need to peacefully survive, to sufficiently provide for the people, and hence to successfully trade by communicating in a way business people find it pragmatically, if not also wholeheartedly and respectfully, 'polite'. It is also these factors that could possibly provide us with an explanation as to why happenings within the global trade arena seemed to have 'phase-led' the direction of politeness research over the last three hundred years since the beginning of the eighteenth century. However, with (i) trade protectionism and neo zero-sum trade ideologies resurfacing<sup>12</sup> after the 2008 financial tsunami, (ii) continuous growth of the world population that is expected to overtake (Crabbè, 2000) our sustainable agricultural carrying capacity in around 2030<sup>13</sup>, (iii) impending depletion of natural resources (e.g. fossil fuels, drinking water etc.) and (iv) the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor as evidenced by the Gini Coefficient reaching record highs in many different countries around the world since the end of World War II (see Figure 3 below), we can foresee that the next phase of politeness research could very likely be narrowing further down from the discursive level to the much smaller and delicate 'class levels within cultures' – levels at which people from a same culture utilize politeness both as a lubricant to grease between the clashing social classes as well as a soft tool for upward social mobility in their sad struggle for sole existence – to the extent where the goodwill of the entire human race which was once made up of the nobility of the ethically polite self is left behind, and eventually forgotten.

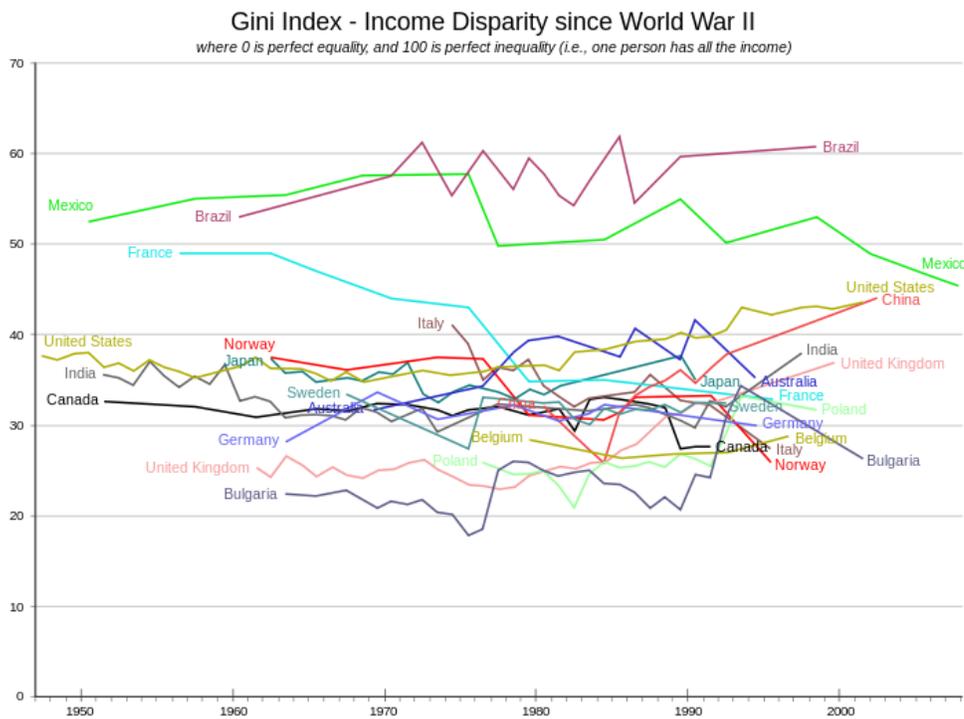


Figure 3. Gini Indices<sup>14</sup>. US Census Bureau 2010.

<sup>12</sup> See the Economist article titled 'The Zero-sum President' dated January 25, 2012, accessible online at <http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2012/01/trade>

<sup>13</sup> Refer to the article, 'World faces perfect storm of problems by 2030, chief scientist to warn.' In The Guardian, dated March 18, 2009, accessible at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2009/mar/18/perfect-storm-john-beddington-energy-food-climate>

<sup>14</sup> Graphics copyright owned by <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Citynoise>

## REFLECTIONS

We started off looking at the historical occurrences of politeness and its major conceptual developments along the time line in terms of the various dominating ideas of the recent decades. One thing we have noticed is that there are multiple linkages between the global economy, world conflicts (in terms of wars), rising population, and politeness. Politeness, in the writer's opinion, seems to be a 'phase-lagging' phenomenon and is a reflection of the people trying their very best to survive under such a difficult, harsh and ever demanding global environment. But if what we see is true, should we be grateful as a researcher since the forthcoming direction of the next phase of politeness research could well be back on track with the old eighteenth-century 'metropolitan sociability' model in a new discursive guise fancied with some kind of 'unique social class features'? Or, should we be worried instead as to the kind of social unrest, particularly in terms of the intensifying conflict and clash between classes that could come round as a result of the factors we discussed, stemming from the current trend of politeness? Alternatively, should we continue to advocate, research, and dig deeper into that 'beauty-but-skin-deep' version of politeness that emphasizes the sort of morphed courtesy tailored for a world that appears to be united, peaceful, yet full of false faces? When politeness in its right self can readily be viewed analogously as a 'rear mirror' of social development, can it not be positively taught as a set of forward-looking heart-warming virtues for the desperate ones who have forever longed to migrate between the seemingly isolated and virtually never ever bridged social strata in a society of falling mobility, rising inequality, mounting racism, ascending scale of repression, violence and injustice?

In any of these cases, the dilemma is always there, haunting the mankind. And while human history is known to be notorious for repeating itself, it is probably high time that the forthcoming trends of politeness studies (and education, of course) focused more on the ethical, philosophical and human side of the issue, and not just the beautiful, face-saving tip of the very dangerous and slippery iceberg that could sink just any man-made, less-than-the-almighty *Titanic*. If this can be done, maybe people will be able to one day understand why youngsters today would say, 'I use bad language but that doesn't mean I am not polite.' What a discursive way to flaunt politeness!

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