

Diplomatic protocol: Etiquette, statecraft and trust (a review)

Original work by Rosalie Rivett published by Whittles Publishing Ltd 2018

Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

Barry Tomalin International House London barrytomalin@aol.com

Published in Training, Language and Culture Vol 2 Issue 1 (2018) pp. 101-104 doi: [10.29366/2018tlc.2.1.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2018tlc.2.1.8)

Recommended citation format: Tomalin, B. (2018). Diplomatic protocol: Etiquette, statecraft and trust (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 2(1), 101-104. doi: [10.29366/2018tlc.2.1.8](https://doi.org/10.29366/2018tlc.2.1.8)



This is an open access article distributed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited (CC BY 4.0)

The training of diplomats and the use of diplomatic language and protocol are specialist, but vital skills. Why? Because diplomats are representatives of their countries around the world and are the keys to successful negotiation of agreements and defusing political tensions at the highest levels. As Rosalie Rivett, author, teacher and Chief Executive of the Women in Diplomacy organisation in London says, *'Protocol is the etiquette of diplomacy. It does so by following certain rules of behaviour. Protocol indicates an acceptable standard in diplomatic discourse, dialogue and negotiation.'*

Language and the way it is used in diplomatic documents is an essential part of protocol. As Rivett explains in the introduction, diplomacy is *'a highly nuanced role played out in language – the diplomatic lexicon – which is carefully chosen and in a manner which enhances the standing of their*

countries among host nations'. Language, therefore, is crucial to diplomatic success and the word protocol itself is derived from ancient Greek *protokollon* meaning 'first glue'. Diplomatic Protocol is a manual aimed at young diplomats in training and in simple language explains how protocol works. The 13 chapters, each with a bullet point summary of key points at the end, examine the roles of diplomats in overseas missions. A considerable advantage of the book is that it contains many examples, some even as recent as 2017. For students of diplomatic language and culture the key chapters are those on Modern Diplomacy, Internet Diplomacy and Media Communications, and Crisis Management.

The author makes the key point that the information age and the use of ICT (Information and Communications Technology) have increasingly robbed diplomats of a key asset in

communicating information, that of time. Rivett explains:

The world has become so small, thanks to instant communications and even faster forms of travel, that an event on one side of the world can spark an immediate reaction on the other, and all of it instantly recorded and shared online. There is no longer time to pause and ponder while a letter or telegram wends its way from an embassy to the home nation. Reaction has to be almost instantaneous, appropriate and at the very least designed not to exacerbate what might be an already volatile situation. It has to be diplomatic and governed by established protocol – the rules of diplomatic exchange and last but not least, it has to be media friendly.'

As Michael Cole, PR advisor and former BBC Royal Correspondent notes in the book, how a diplomat reacts to a crisis is key to how it will be reported and as a result how the diplomat, the mission and the country he/she represents will be perceived.

The important thing is to take control of the crisis, talk to the relevant people, be available for interviews and answering questions, keeping it simple (avoid jargon), listen, apologise if you get things wrong (everyone makes mistakes), if you can't answer, explain why (legal constraints, family, etc.) and above all, advises Cole, never say

'No comment'.

In an interesting and rather amusing illustration of how media can influence diplomatic etiquette, Rivett describes how the body language of the diplomatic handshake for the TV cameras can itself be a power play: *'You may notice some people jockeying for position prior to a photograph being taken of them shaking hands; this is because they know that the person whose hand is closer to the camera and thus more visible will be perceived as dominant over the one whose hand is concealed.'*

Rivett points out that diplomatic language is a formal and specific use of language. It is not the same as polite business language. *'Even in our modern world the very language of diplomacy is more formalised than general conversation or written exchanges.'* Even in protests or criticism of another state's attitudes or actions, she explains that however harsh or critical the message, *'it is traditionally understood that the ambassador is merely conveying the wishes, comments, even criticisms of his/her home state ... whatever language or tone is used, the aim is always to keep the channels of communication open.'*

This is why it is important to maintain the protocol of third person singular or plural in *Notes* or *Notes Verbales*, as they are called in the UN, and use standard phrases, such as *'has the honour to'*,

'avails himself/herself of the opportunity to' and *'expresses concern regarding'*. Letters between Heads of State may be more personal, using 'I' and 'we', but will still be more formal in general style. The increasingly informal style of business correspondence is not the trend in diplomatic correspondence. *'Dear Ambassador Smith or Dear Bill are not acceptable as diplomatic greetings, although you can get away with the equivalents in business correspondence where formality in some environments may be seen as a disadvantage.'*

There is greater convergence between business and diplomacy in the area of recognising and adapting to cultural sensitivities. In November 2010, British Prime Minister, David Cameron, turned up for an official visit to China wearing a red poppy to commemorate Remembrance Day which honours military personnel who died in World Wars I and II. The Chinese objected. For them the red poppy was a reminder of the opium wars of the late 19th century. The Chinese asked David Cameron to remove the poppy. Cameron's advisers refused. Note to protocol officer, *'Don't send senior British politicians to China during Remembrance Week'*.

On a visit to the G20 meeting in Hanzhou in China in 2016, President Obama had no red carpet laid out for him when he arrived whereas all other Heads of State did. Was this a snub by the Chinese or simply due to the fact that President

Obama descended the steps of the presidential plane directly and didn't wait for the red carpeted steps provided by the Chinese authorities? Rivett notes that etiquette sets the tone for all linguistic and cultural negotiations. What is said and done and what is unsaid are equally important, and the use of constructive ambiguity is an important linguistic and cultural skill in diplomatic communication. English, Rivett believes, is full of ambiguity, an average of six synonyms for every word. In Arabic, family terms are very important. English has only one word for 'cousin', but Arabic has eight words to denote first cousins and sixteen for second cousins, distinguishing who is being referred to and the degree of kinship.

The last 20 years have seen major changes in how we communicate through the emergence of the Internet and social media. Does this mean that language and cultural protocol in the Diplomatic Service and international organisations like the UN are out of date? Part of the diplomat's job, says Rivett, is to *'evaluate and interpret information and advise the home nation on what is important and what is mere rumour and speculation'*. The Internet and social media have dramatically increased the amount of information to be processed. In addition, *cyberpolitik* and cyber warfare has added a new dimension to political and diplomatic security and *mediapolitik* is the new reality. Rivett quotes former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who asserted that CNN international

news and current affairs TV station had become the de facto 16th member of the UN Security Council, influencing views worldwide. How long before Facebook applies for admission?

All in all, this is a useful, straightforward and reasonably concise primer for young diplomats and future members of international organisations with insights into and examples of both good and questionable observations of protocol. A future edition would benefit from an index and also a summary of references (currently footnotes) and

further reading suggestions at the end. However, the question remains that in order to connect with a media savvy generation does diplomatic language and culture need to change? Many would argue that it must. Rivett is more cautious. *'The purpose of diplomats is dialogue, keeping lines of communication open, and understanding the protocols, traditions and the history and culture of the countries and faith groups they deal with.'* In doing so, the observance of a commonly recognised language and cultural protocol is essential to civilised discourse.