

# Review

## Intercultural politeness: Managing relations across cultures (a review)

Original work by Helen Spencer-Oatey and Daniel Z. Kadar published by Cambridge University Press 2021

Reviewed by Maurice Cassidy

**Maurice Cassidy** International House London, UK [maurice22grove@icloud.com](mailto:maurice22grove@icloud.com)

**Article history** Received February 1, 2021 | Revised March 3, 2021 | Accepted March 9, 2021

**Conflicts of interest** The author declared no conflicts of interest

**Research funding** No funding was reported for this research

**doi** 10.22363/2521-442X-2021-5-1-97-99

**For citation** Cassidy, M. (2021). Intercultural politeness: Managing relations across cultures (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 5(1), 97-99.



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, including transformation and building upon the material for any purpose, provided the original author(s) and source are properly cited (CC BY 4.0)

It goes without saying that globalisation has brought many more people from different countries together than ever before and put more and more into contact virtually via ICT such as the Internet and social media platforms. Intercultural theorists have identified a range of features that enable people to work together and one of them is how to build relationships. Intercultural theory differentiates between task-oriented and relationship-oriented cultures, and research indicates that the majority of the countries of the world are primarily relationship-oriented. In relationship-oriented countries it's important you build a relationship first, whereas in task-oriented countries you build the relationship through working successfully together. But the task comes first. I use the expression as a generalisation as individuals in task-oriented cultures might be relationship-oriented and vice versa. However, since the majority of the world is relationship- rather than task-oriented it is important to pay due attention not just to how

people behave but how they express their feelings and build relationships. In that process of building international relationships, politeness is extremely important and that is why this book is so timely and so valuable. It explores what intercultural politeness means, how it is expressed and how it can be used to help build relationships and resolve conflicts.

Helen Spencer-Oatey, Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick UK, and Daniel Z. Kadar, Professor at the Dalian University of Foreign Languages in China, have joined forces to write an evaluative approach to how relationships are formed and, in the case of conflict, re-established, in different cultures around the world. In doing so they have made an important addition to the literature on improving relations across cultures.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 *Conceptual Foundations* provides the theoretical basis of the book. Part 2 explores *Evaluation of Polite-*

*'The book is intended for researchers into intercultural theory, pragmatics and conflict research but is also relevant for intercultural trainers and language teachers. Each chapter ends with a summary and some with questions for reflection and discussion in class'*

ness Across Cultures, evaluating the politeness norms and establishing a framework for analysing and evaluating politeness formulae. Part 3 entitled *Managing Politeness Across Cultures* looks at how to build good relations through politeness, how to maintain them and how to restore them when things go wrong. Part 4 draws a conclusion on the importance of politeness theory and its application to intercultural theory and practice.

The book is intended for researchers into intercultural theory, pragmatics and conflict research but is also relevant for intercultural trainers and language teachers. Each chapter ends with a summary and some with questions for reflection and discussion in class.

The first two chapters explore the theories behind politeness as a lingua-cultural discipline but broadening their investigation. Politeness is a relationship building practice among culturally identified groups, sometimes described as national, but this is misleading. It helps distinguish ingroups from outgroups. The cultural patterning, as the authors describe it, reflects linguistic behaviour within their values and attitudes and behavioural norms. The treatment is firmly theoretical but peppered with explanatory diagrammes and very useful critical incidents as illustration of the points made, reflecting the authors' wide international experience.

A lot of perceived impoliteness comes from misunderstandings between people from different cultural backgrounds with different ways of expressing themselves. The authors offer a four-step politeness evaluation process. Step 1, *Behaviour in Context*, recognises that any interaction between

people takes place in a context. Step 2 is *Normalcy and Triggering the Evaluation Process*. In other words, we know what we would normally expect and anything different triggers the evaluation process. Step 3 is *Evaluation of Behaviour and the Agent*. We encounter an exchange we are not familiar with, and quite possible perceive as 'impolite' and that leads to our forming an opinion of the other person in the exchange, and quite probably them of us. That leads to Step 4, *Evaluation Warrant*, which is an examination of why the person behaved in the way they did both linguistically and culturally and on what grounds it might have caused offence. Although described here at some length, the four-step evaluation process may happen in just a few seconds but is also useful for reflection and examination after the event.

On what grounds do we base our assumptions of politeness and impoliteness in exchanges? The authors identify three key cultural factors. First is our evaluative judgement that there has been a breach of norms and expectations that we are accustomed to. Secondly, our concerns and goals have not been observed or appreciated with a consequent feeling of loss of face. Thirdly, the other person or persons have not observed what we consider to be social rights and obligations. As the authors point out, such issues do not always cause agitation. Misunderstandings may be perceived as amusing or quaint. Nevertheless, they are capable of diminishing the value of the interaction so it is worth trying to get it right.

The authors go on to examine the impact of perceived impoliteness on what they describe as the individual's perception of morality. There is a tendency to assume that because I perceive someone to have done something impolite – they *are* impolite as a person. In fact, as the authors point out, it is important to separate the problem from the person. A person may have said or done something that you perceive of as impolite but it is not that they are impolite as a person. Do not confuse the problem with the person.

Up to now the authors have focused on the problem of inappropriate interaction which leads to feelings of impoliteness and creates moral

judgements of the character apparently guilty of impoliteness. The other person in the exchange may also consider us impolite. In Part 3 of the book the authors address these perceptions. First, they distinguish between pro-active politeness (initiated by you) and reactive politeness (your correct response to someone else's politeness), for example the exchanging of business cards in Japan, what you do and what you say. They identify three stages in the process, *perception* (of rudeness or inappropriacy), *response to that perception* and the *consequences of that response*, which might involve apologies, disagreement and conflict. Proactive politeness, the authors assert, has been extensively researched but reactive politeness much less so. How then can international agents, whoever they are and in whatever context, establish positive relationships with those they are dealing with?

First of all, it is important to recognise the importance of 'proactive management' to reinforce and improve international relationships. This means understanding the key principles of cultural interaction and politeness theory and applying

them proactively to achieve cooperation. The authors emphasise directness and indirectness as a key cultural feature in understanding the cultural perception of what might be perceived as appropriate and inappropriate in politeness rituals. They go on to stress the importance of rapport maintenance using mindfulness and emotional intelligence to recognise and compensate for those moments when politeness formulae might be perceived as inappropriate.

So, finally, how can people use etiquette and politeness as a way of cementing positive intercultural relations with those they deal with? First is adopting the cultural formulae of those they deal with. Second is being aware of the cultural assumptions of how they act and how others act or react. Third is using mindfulness and emotional intelligence to spot when an exchange may be inappropriate and taking immediate steps to rectify any misunderstanding. Ultimately, we are all capable of recognising and adapting to different cultural and linguistic expressions of politeness and adapting to them. This book theoretically and practically will aid progress in this direction.

AUTHOR INFORMATION: MAURICE CASSIDY  
International House London | 16 Stukeley Street, WC2B5LQ London, UK  
[maurice22grove@icloud.com](mailto:maurice22grove@icloud.com)