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# Reconfiguring the strategic/non-strategic binary in im/politeness research

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**Abstract:** In this article, I explore the potential of the strategic/non-strategic distinction to link im/politeness with recent developments in pragmatics more generally. My point of departure is the claim that the binary between strategic/non-strategic politeness, as drawn in previous research starting with the distinction between discernment and volition, leaves a blind-spot when it comes to established ways of achieving politeness that do not rely on recognition of the speaker's intention, yet go beyond a pre-defined repertoire of forms. To shed light on this blind spot, I recruit the notions of first-order (S1) and higher-order (S2) polite speakers from Rational Speech Act models, which distinguish between different types of speakers depending on the degree to which they reason not just about their own goals but also about what the hearer thinks of them. However, contrary to the standard RSA model, I propose to think of such reflexive reasoning as a matter of degree, which can be used to explain a continuum of uses from strategic to non-strategic politeness. This move highlights points of contact between theoretical traditions that have developed independently and helps to reinstate im/politeness as a driver of pragmatics research broadly conceived.

**Keywords:** discernment; volition; social indexing; form-based politeness; content-based politeness

## 1 Introduction: two meanings of "strategic"

Before setting out to develop my argument regarding the strategic/non-strategic distinction in im/politeness research, it is important to distinguish between two different understandings of "strategic" in the linguistic im/politeness literature and clarify which of these I have in mind. Ever since Brown and Levinson (1987) outlined five politeness super-strategies (bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off-record politeness, and "don't do the FTA"/silence), each of which (except the last one) subsumes a number of sub-strategies associated with different degrees of

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face-mitigation, “strategic politeness” may be understood as politeness realized by means of one of these strategies, i.e., as all (verbal) politeness *tout court*.

Contrary to this broad understanding, what I have in mind is a narrower, more technical understanding of “strategic”, which involves the speaker formulating their utterance in light of how they expect a specific audience to interpret it. The English verb “strategize” captures this element of pre-emptive speaker calculation and, although the idea of politeness as rational means-ends accounting is one of the foundations of Brown and Levinson’s approach (1987: 63–65), other researchers have pointed out that such an understanding of politeness is limiting, in that it leaves out other, non-calculative ways in which politeness is realized. Such ways do not involve rational means-ends calculation on behalf of individual agents but rather choosing from a pre-figured repertoire of options – which may, at times, come down to a single option – available to a speaker given the circumstances and their position in the social hierarchy. My claim in this article – also informed by what in the meantime has transpired by experimental investigations of other pragmatic phenomena, such as irony – is that this binary choice between calculative and non-calculative politeness is only apparent. In actual fact, speakers may engage with what listeners (will) think to various degrees, depending also on cultural (Brown 2011: 82) and individual (Spotorno and Noveck 2014) differences between them.

To unfold this argument, I begin by reviewing some related distinctions and uses of “strategic” in the linguistic politeness literature (Section 2), before introducing a new distinction between form-based and content-based politeness, intended to help clear out eventual confusion surrounding its use (Section 3). In Section 4, I briefly outline the Rational Speech Act model (Frank and Goodman 2012) and its application to politeness theory by Yoon et al. (2020), while in Section 5, I engage what I see as a weakness of the RSA account of politeness and provide a brief critique. Section 6 subsequently draws on findings from experimental pragmatics research on other phenomena to propose how this account can be improved. Finally, Section 7 summarizes the argument and draws out some implications for pragmatics research at large.

## 2 Previous takes on the strategic versus non-strategic distinction in politeness research

The idea that politeness can also be achieved non-strategically, that is, without on the spot calculation by the speaker of how best to cast their message in order to avoid damage to their face and/or that of the addressee, came to prominence in Sachiko Ide’s 1989 article “Formal forms and discernment: two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness".[1] Building on previous work by Hill et al. (1986), Ide used the terms "volition" and "discernment" (the latter an English-language rendition of Japanese *wakimae*) to describe what she saw as two different types of politeness. In the strategic type of politeness ("volition"), which she also called "rational", the speaker actively formulates the verbal expression that best conveys their intention by following one of Brown and Levinson's (1987) five verbal strategies; while in the communicative type of politeness ("discernment"), which she also called "non-rational", the speaker simply chooses from a closed repertoire of pre-existing linguistic forms, thereby displaying awareness of their place/role in a given situation. In the latter case, as Ide aptly put it, linguistic forms serve not the face wants of the interlocutors but rather those "of roles and settings" (1989: 231). The paradigm case of discernment politeness, according to Ide (1989: 233), are honorifics, although she conceded that both volition and discernment politeness can be found universally; indeed, they "are points on a continuum and in most actual language usage, one finds that most utterances are … to some extent a mixture of the two" (Ide 1989: 232). Yet, Ide saw these two types of politeness as *qualitatively different*, with the main difference between them being that discernment politeness involves social rules about the use of specific forms, while volition politeness is not limited to specific forms but rather involves (possibly creative, novel) ways of formulating one's message *in order to* avoid threat to the speaker's or the addressee's face. This teleological aspect of politeness – the "why"/to achieve what goal(s) a speaker uses a particular expression – will be a central theme in the discussion that follows.

The volition versus discernment distinction as proposed by Ide has not been without its critics. In a subsequent article based on Japanese data, Fukada and Asato (2004), among others, objected that the reason why Japanese speakers use honorifics is not simply to acknowledge the wants of roles and settings but rather because this constitutes their own face by demonstrating their knowledge of, and adherence to, Japanese language conventions. As they write, "[w]omen, the well-educated, the aged, and urbanites like to speak a refined, elegant language and use elaborate honorifics to serve their own face wants, such as being perceived as having had a good upbringing, and being intelligent, decent or sophisticated persons" (2004: 2000). Moreover, they argued, Brown and Levinson's framework is adequate to account for honorific use in Japanese, once one considers the "vertical" nature of Japanese society, as well as a range of non-routine honorific uses, including honorifics addressed to social inferiors or omitted when talking about social superiors who have behaved dishonourably (Fukada and Asato 2004: 1997–1998), and honorifics

**1** Similar ideas had been circulating in Korean linguistic circles since at least the 1970s (see Brown 2011: 65 and the references therein).

exchanged between social equals in formal contexts and taciturnity to social superiors (2004: 1999–2000).[2]

Related to my current argument, when it comes to routine uses of honorifics which they see as reflecting the verticality of Japanese society, Fukada and Asato acknowledge the automaticity of the relevant inferences (2004: 1997, footnote 3). What they disagree with is Ide's claim that this somehow necessitates a discernment approach, because they think that such automatic honorific use can still be accounted for within Brown and Levinson's framework by "locking in", so to speak, the values of Power and Distance relatively high. The problem with this solution is that, while making the correct empirical predictions, it fails to capture the fact that, given a context, some uses of honorifics (which I shall call routine or non-strategic) are expected while others (which I shall call strategic) are surprising and unexpected, and it is only the latter that are felt to communicate something about the specific speaker's intention in that language.[3] In other words, routine uses of honorifics in Japanese do not involve on-the-spot, calculative reasoning about what the hearer will think but, rather, the bringing about of ourselves as social personae in this world, which all language use inevitably performs because all language use is indexical as well as being referential at one and the same time (on politeness strategies also performing identity functions, see Terkourafi 2002).[4] This intuitive difference

2 In a more radical critique of this distinction, Pizziconi (2011) outright rejects it, arguing instead that *wakimae* (discernment) essentially involves a kind of form-to-context matching found universally (not just in Japanese and not just in languages with honorifics, which are simply a fossilized version of social indexing performed inferentially in other languages). This type of form-to-context matching that (re)produces situational appropriateness is very much in line with the frame-based approach (Terkourafi 2001) which I introduce briefly in Section 5 below and as such I will not expand on it further here, except to highlight that, while all forms perform various indexical functions, sometimes they perform those in and of themselves – in the way of Silverstein's (2003) second-order indexicals – while at other times they are recruited specifically by the speaker to do so – in the way of Silverstein's third-order indexicals (see also footnote 4 below). So the essential intuition underlying the discernment-volition distinction which I think is worth keeping is not the ability of linguistic forms to perform social indexing functions (which clearly all forms can do) but in virtue of what they perform those functions – in virtue of their lexical pragmatic (Clark 2013) meaning (discernment), or in virtue of the speaker's intention (volition).

3 As for Fukada and Asato's other objections, I consider examples of honorifics addressed to social inferiors or withheld from social superiors who have behaved dishonourably as examples of honorific shifts which show that honorifics can also be used strategically (as part of "volition" politeness, in Ide's terms); while their examples of honorifics exchanged between social equals in formal contexts and of taciturnity to social superiors (2004: 1999–2000) are precisely what Ide aimed to address by referring to discernment politeness as oriented to "the wants of roles and settings".

4 A parallel example here would be my variable pronunciation of the Greek negative particle /oxi/, 'no', sometimes as [oçi] (the standard variant) and sometimes as [oi] (a regional variant), which indexes an urban versus regional identity without me consciously trying to do so and which I can

between routine and strategic uses of honorifics *cannot* be captured under the umbrella of a politeness that always requires recognition of the speaker's intention, as postulated by Brown and Levinson for all politeness (1987: 5).[5]

The view expressed here also aligns with that of Obana and Haugh (2023) who distinguish "conventional honorifics" (what I call routine) from "strategic" ones. However, my view also differs from theirs in that, while I agree that conventional honorifics effect a type of social indexing, as explained above, I still consider them part of linguistic politeness, under a second-order definition of politeness as "all linguistic behaviour seen through its potential to impact face" (Terkourafi 2005a: 252). That is because, even when used routinely and as expected, honorifics still have an impact on face (in addition to whatever other perlocutionary effects they may be bringing about in context, including identity), in the sense of bringing face into existence in the first place. For how else does face come into existence except through discourse?[6]

The idea that at least some politeness also performs a social indexing function is echoed in Kasper's early review of "Current issues in politeness research" (1990), where she draws a distinction between "strategic politeness" used to reach specific communicative goals and "social indexing", which amounts to expressing deference entitlements (ascribed and achieved properties of interactants) through linguistic forms. Notably – and not unproblematically, as we shall see in the next section – both Ide and Kasper associated "volition" (Ide)/"strategic politeness" (Kasper) with the use of verbal strategies from Brown and Levinson's hierarchy of politeness strategies, and "discernment" (Ide)/"social indexing" (Kasper) with a closed repertoire of linguistic forms that encode specific role relationships and differentials.

Similarly, motivated by an attempt to fit honorifics into his politeness model, Leech (2014: 108–109) drew a distinction between "trivalent" and "bivalent" politeness. The bifurcation of linguistic expressions into strategies and forms is key to this distinction. According to Leech, trivalent politeness is transactional and is motivated by the speaker's wish to perform an act that involves the hearer. That is, trivalent politeness, as the name suggests, involves the triangle of speaker, hearer, and act.[7]

manipulate if I become aware of it – but routinely do not. Another way to think about such routine displays of identity is as "second-order" indexicals in Silverstein's (2003) theory of indexicality, with the more conscious, manipulated, "strategic" uses falling under Silverstein's "third-order" indexicals.

**5** Recall that for Brown & Levinson, "linguistic politeness is […] implicated in the classical way, with maximum theoretical parsimony, from the CP" (1987: 5), which makes all politeness in their view a matter of particularized conversational implicature, relying on recognition of the speaker's intention, as also pointed out by Arundale (1999).

**6** The idea that both conventional/routine uses and strategic uses of honorifics have an impact on face and are thus relevant to politeness (in the politeness2 sense) is also found in Brown (2011: 63).

**7** Leech (2014: 109) relates this back to Brown & Levinson's three sociological variables D, P, and R.

Most of English politeness, according to Leech, falls under this category. On the other hand, bivalent politeness, which Leech sees as limited to honorifics and central to some Asian languages and cultures, is motivated by the relationship between Speaker and Addressee or Speaker and Referent, that is, it involves only two parties. This means that bivalent politeness is called for whether the speaker wishes to perform a particular act or not.[8]

Leech's definition of bivalent politeness is reminiscent of Fukada and Asato's (2004) claim that the verticality of Japanese society means that, in order to account for honorification in that lingua-culture, one need only take into account the values of Power and Distance from Brown and Levinson's model (which are set toward the higher end of the scale in that culture), leaving aside their third sociological variable, the Ranking $R_x$ of the FTA *x* to be performed. However, unlike Ide and, especially, Kasper, both of whom acknowledged that forms that routinely do social indexing, such as honorifics, can also be used strategically, Leech's separation of trivalent from bivalent politeness suggests that politeness – which, significantly, Leech defines as giving value to Other and/or withholding value from Self – ensues every time honorific forms are used. In other words, honorific forms somehow encode politeness in and of themselves. However, as is well known since at least Kikuchi (1994; see also Brown 2008; Obana 2020, among others), actual honorific use may diverge from what one assumes the speaker-hearer (/-referent) relationship to have been until now. In such cases, use of a particular honorific may not be motivated by wishing to give value to Other and/or withholding value from Self (Leech's definition of politeness; 2014: 90) but by other interactional goals such as power, identity, gratitude and may indeed be tied to the performance of a particular act (for some examples, see Obana and Haugh 2023: 30). Honorifics used "strategically" in this way make the relationship between speaker and addressee the object of negotiation, "straddling", so to say, the boundary from bivalent into trivalent politeness, since changing that relationship is now the transactional goal they are used to perform.

The possibility that linguistic expressions (whether verbal strategies used creatively or a closed repertoire of forms) may not only reflect the relationship between interlocutors but can be actively used to change it, is most explicitly addressed by Brown and Levinson, when they discuss possible uses of their verbal strategies as a social accelerator or brake (1989: 231). Crucially, in their framework such uses are discharged through the same verbal strategies they have been

**8** It follows that bivalent politeness may co-exist with trivalent politeness in the same utterance (Leech 2014: 109), something predicted also by Ide, when she writes that "most utterances are … a mixture of [discernment and volition]" (1989: 232), and by Obana & Haugh, when they write that "honorifics, whether conventional or strategic, are, strictly speaking, 'markings' on strategically constructed utterances" (2023: 34).

proposing all along (i.e., they do not involve a switch to a different mode of politeness or a different set of expressions) but diverge from what the hearer might expect in the situation given their current standing vis-à-vis the speaker and are taken to communicate the speaker's wish to either come closer to the hearer by verbally reducing the Distance and/or Power between them (when situationally those values are high), or, conversely, to distance themself from the hearer by verbally increasing the values of these variables (when situationally they are low). Nevertheless, for Brown and Levinson, the existence of such uses of their strategies does not deny their assertion that politeness overall is a matter of calculated departures from the cooperative principle (CP) ("implicated, with maximum theoretical parsimony, from the CP") and of the hearer's recognizing that. In other words, uses of politeness strategies as a social accelerator or break are simply "more agentive" than the usual, expectation-meeting uses of their strategies, which, nevertheless, remain agentive in their account, because they require a speaker intention and the recognition of that intention.[9]

In sum, several politeness theorists have noted and tried to account for the fact that there exist less agentive than usual (discernment/social indexing/bivalent) and more agentive than usual (social accelerator & break) uses of linguistic expressions (whether forms or strategies) associated with linguistic politeness. On the one hand, by making politeness contingent on recognizing the speaker's intention, Brown and Levinson (and Fukada and Asato 2004, who follow suit) do not account for the different flavour of discernment/social indexing politeness performed by routine uses of honorifics in Asian cultures (but possibly also existing under different guises in other cultures). On the other hand, by associating discernment/social indexing politeness with honorifics,[10] Ide, Kasper, and Leech are hard pressed to explain why honorifics perform politeness only sometimes while at other times they clearly do not. Moreover, they cannot account for discernment/social indexing politeness

**9** This is of course problematic from a Gricean perspective because particularized conversational implicatures, which is what Brown & Levinson claim normal uses of their strategies are, are as "agentive" as you can get in Grice's model. While conventional and generalized conversational implicatures are less "agentive" types of implicature given that they arise without recourse to the speaker's intention, there is no "more agentive" type of implicature than particularized ones, which is what would be needed to capture the intuitive difference in agentivity between normal uses of their strategies and the uses of these strategies as social accelerator and break.

**10** This may be seen as a sort of cultural short-sightedness, caused by the fact that the point of departure for these observations were honorifics in Japanese. Yet, honorifics have grammaticalized counterparts in several languages, including languages that use a T/V distinction, to give one example.

which is not discharged via honorifics but via other forms, which may not necessarily be accompanied by the same morphological or syntactic reflexes and hence may look more like the more open-ended strategies of volition politeness.

## 3 An orthogonal distinction: form-based politeness and content-based politeness

A confounding factor in the above discussion is the origin of the politeness evaluation: is a linguistic expression evaluated as polite because of the way it looks (its form) or because of what it means (its propositional content)? To see the difference between the two, consider first the difference between being addressed by First Name and by Title + Last Name. The choice between these two forms makes no difference to the proposition expressed by the utterance, since they both refer to the same entity (the addressee). However, Title + LN is generally found in formal contexts and FN in informal ones. This intuitively makes Title + LN sound more "polite" (in a first-order politeness sense) than FN. The same goes, in languages with inflectional morphology, for using a full form (Greek *απόδειξη*, Dutch *bon*) as opposed to a diminutivised one (Greek *αποδειξούλα*, Dutch *bonnetje*) to refer to the same entity (all of these forms mean 'receipt' in English but the diminutivised forms sound "cuter" than the full ones). There is no underlying principle such as face or giving/withholding value to explain this intuition. Synchronically, their politeness value comes from the contexts in which they are used (which is also why diachronically this politeness value can change). For instance, diminutives in Standard Modern Greek have gone from being a positive politeness strategy to being a negative politeness one, as their use in urban centres became generalized to transactional contexts (Terkourafi 2009). Similar examples are the passage from *you* as the formal form to its being the general form of address with concomitant obsolescence of the former informal form, *thou*, in the history of English; and various distributions of politeness values between the address forms *tu*, *ustéd* and *vos* in Spanishes around the world. These are all examples of form-based politeness, in that the corresponding expressions are evaluated as polite in virtue of their paradigmatic (in the Saussurean sense) relationship to other forms in the system of the same linguistic variety which could have been used without changing the proposition expressed by the utterance.

Conversely, in content-based politeness, the politeness of a linguistic expression comes not from its form but from its meaning. The difference between "Open the window!", "Can you open the window?" and "It's hot in here" is a difference in propositional content and, although they can all be used to ask someone to open the window, they do not all mean the same nor do they describe the same situation. This time, the difference between them *can* be explained by appealing to an underlying principle such as positive and negative face or giving/withholding value: “It’s hot in here” when the speaker actually wants a window opened allows freedom of action to the hearer and doesn’t even name the act, while “Can you open the window?” similarly avoids imposing on them but names the act. Conversely, “Open the window!” imposes on them, which makes it impolite in case avoiding imposition (=negative face) is more important under the circumstances. Similarly, using Leech’s maxims, both “It’s hot in here” and “Can you open the window?” are polite because they lower the value of Self’s wishes, while “Open the window” does not do that, and is thereby impolite. It is important to realize that what infringes on negative face and/or lowers the value of Self’s wishes in these examples is the propositional content of the utterance, how the speech act of opening a window is formulated each time (Austin’s locutionary act), and not the speech act of requesting to open a window itself (Austin’s illocutionary act), which remains the same in all cases. The possibility of calculating the politeness value of an expression from its propositional content depending on how this propositional content affects face/Self-Other values indeed makes content-based politeness rational, something that can be figured out and decided upon, as Ide (1989) claimed for volition politeness.[11] However, for reasons that I shall come to in a moment, it does not follow that content-based politeness is always rational, nor that form-based politeness is non-rational.

What we are dealing with here is none other than the interface between semantics and pragmatics: form-based politeness may be seen as a matter of (lexical) semantics, covering stored meanings that must be learnt, while content-based politeness is a matter of pragmatics, and can be rationally inferred. Crucially, what this discussion leaves out is that politeness is not the only perlocutionary effect that can follow when linguistic expressions, be they instances of form-based or content-based politeness, are used. Other effects include, as already mentioned in Section 2, relevant social (ethnic, gender, class) identities and personae. Such concerns are always and simultaneously at play in interaction, alongside face-constituting itself.[12] This means that expressions which are equivalent in terms of form-based or content-based politeness may differ in other ways. The interplay between all of these factors, then, can favour the use of certain linguistic expressions over others in some

**11** Notably, despite being summarily dubbed “rational” by Ide (1989), Brown and Levinson’s strategies are a mixture of form-based and content-based politeness, since these authors include many instances of form-based politeness (honorifics, nicknames, diminutives) as sub-strategies of either negative or positive politeness (or, as in the cases of diminutives, of both).

**12** This is what is referred to as “intersectionality” in sociolinguistics (Levon 2015). On top of this, momentary concerns such as manipulating power or displaying emotion also shape interaction but these are not our primary concern here, inasmuch as they are only foregrounded in specific moments rather than regularly achieved by use of these expressions.

interactional contexts and between certain types of speakers and addressees. Users faced with a frequently encountered linguistic expression do not bother reasoning about its meaning but rather learn to associate it with a certain politeness value by default in that context. As a result, expressions used more frequently in a certain context can become form-based politeness in that context, even if their politeness could originally be accounted for as content-based. The politeness of those linguistic expressions, in other words, now follows from the contexts in which they are used, much like form-based politeness as explained above. These are cases of conventionalization (Terkourafi 2015) and they are exactly why treating the distinction between linguistic forms (whose politeness, being form-based, is read off a stable form, all else being equal) and verbal strategies (whose politeness, being content-based, is inferred and can be discharged through different forms) as a dichotomy is unsatisfactory.

For those working on language change, especially from a cognitive linguistic point of view, this does not come as a surprise, since it is clear that lexical semantic (encoded) meanings have their beginnings in pragmatic (context-dependent) ones which, through processes described in the literature as entrenchment (Schmid 2015), conventionalization (Terkourafi 2015) and grammaticalization (Hopper and Traugott 2003), can (but need not) gradually acquire external (morphological, syntactic) markings of their uses. However, if such markings are not necessary and the only indication of their conventionalized status is their frequent use in a context, this means that we cannot look to the linguistic make-up of an expression (is it one of a closed set of forms or does it rather correspond to a verbal strategy that can be expressed through many different forms?) to decide whether it constitutes discernment/social indexing or volition/strategic politeness. Any linguistic expression may realize discernment/social indexing or volition/strategic functions at different times.

Among im/politeness scholars, too, this is not a new insight. Scholars have noted for some time that our daily courtesies tend to go unnoticed and have proposed labels such as "unmarked" (Terkourafi 2001), "anticipated" (Haugh 2003) and "politic" (Watts 2003) to capture that. On the one hand, when it matches hearer expectations in context, even content-based politeness (e.g., uttering "Can you open the window?" as a request) passes unnoticed, and on the other hand, when it deviates from those expectations, even form-based politeness (e.g., use of an honorific form) can get noticed. The difference between them lies not so much in whether their politeness comes from their form or from their content, but rather in how injected with the speaker's intention different uses of the same linguistic expression are. As I see it, any linguistic expression can be used according to already established conventions for its use or departing from such conventions to various degrees – that is, less or more strategically. This means that strategic versus non-strategic politeness are not two *qualitatively* distinct types of politeness. Rather, the difference between them is *quantitative* and has to do with the extent to which the speaker takes the hearer's viewpoint into account when formulating their utterance. The more a speaker does that, the more their use of a linguistic expression is a strategic one. While both strategic and non-strategic politeness bring the social world into existence, non-strategic politeness brings a familiar social world into existence, a world as the hearer already imagined it to be. Because of this, non-strategic politeness passes unnoticed and is "world confirming". Strategic politeness, on the other hand, conveys to the hearer new information about what the world is like. For this reason, strategic politeness gets noticed and is "world changing".

# 4 The Rational Speech Act model of politeness

How can we account for these intuitions theoretically? Among recent developments in pragmatics, a good starting point is the Rational Speech Act model (henceforth RSA) proposed by Frank and Goodman (2012). In the RSA, speakers and listeners reason about each other's reasoning. This offers a way to theoretically unpack the intuition that some uses of linguistic expressions are more effortful and stand out compared with others. Crucially, the RSA is a probabilistic model: how much effort a speaker will invest in producing language depends on their goals in the interaction, which make it more or less likely that they will use one expression over another to express the same message. Based on the expression used, the hearer can work their way back to what the speaker's goals were.[13] To apply the RSA to politeness, Yoon et al. (2020) distinguish between two pairs of interlocutors: a Pragmatic speaker interacting with a Literal listener and a Polite speaker interacting with a Pragmatic listener. In these two pairs, the interlocutors reason about each other's reasoning to different extents, as shown in Figure 1 (reproduced from Yoon et al. 2020: 74).

Let us start with the Pragmatic speaker interacting with a Literal listener. Given an external reality (a state of the world *s*) and a range of linguistic expressions with different semantic (literal) meanings that can be used to describe it, the Pragmatic speaker, S1, will choose a different expression to describe it depending on whether their goal is informational (being truthful) or prosocial (making the listener feel good). For instance, if I ask what you thought of my presentation and you thought that it was terrible (this is the state of the world *s*), you can say "It was terrible" (utterance *u*), if your goal is informational, and "It was amazing" (a different

13 In this article, I use "goals" instead of "utilities", which is the term commonly used in probability-based models.

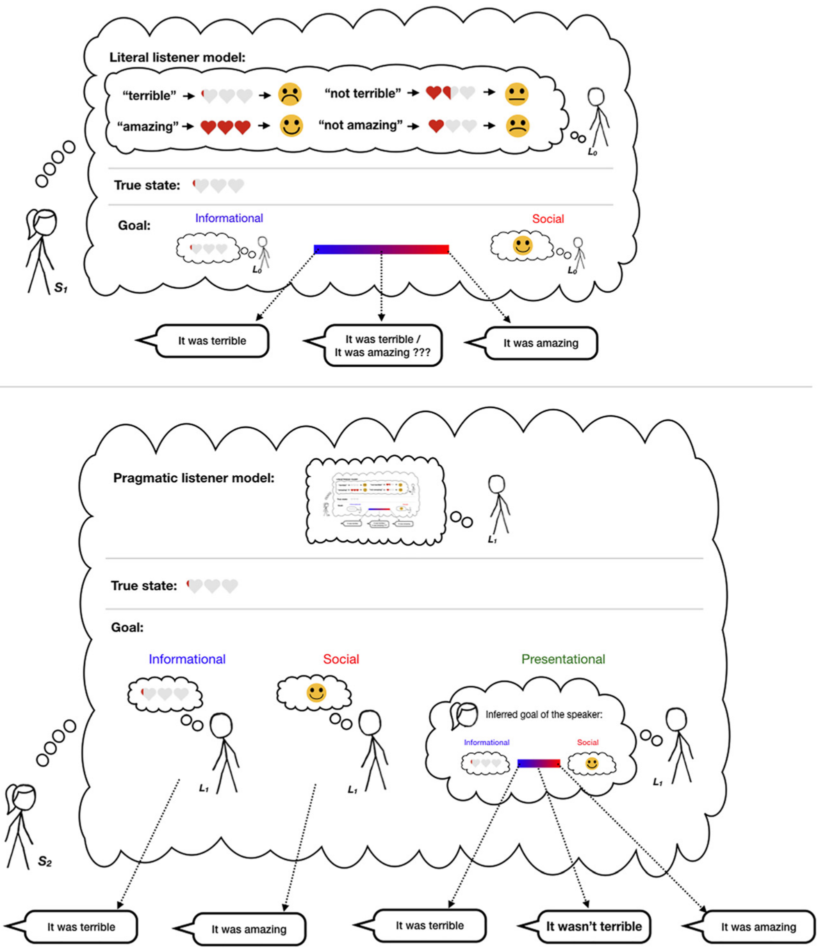


**Figure 1:** Top diagram: the Pragmatic speaker (S1) chooses utterance *u* by maximizing the probability that a naive, Literal listener, L0, would correctly infer the state of the world *s* given the literal meaning of *u*. Bottom diagram: the sophisticated, pragmatic listener, L1, reasons about the pragmatic speaker, S1, and infers the state of the world *s* given that the speaker chose to produce the utterance *u*. The Polite speaker (S2) reasons about such a Pragmatic listener L1 (reproduced from Yoon et al. 2020: 74).

utterance *u*), if your goal is prosocial (Figure 1, top diagram).[14] The latter is a non-literal use of "It was amazing", because its literal meaning does not correspond to the

14 Of course, a speaker with an unmixed informational goal can still use any of the other expressions in Figure 1 ("not terrible", "not amazing", "amazing") if that expression literally describes the true state of the world (their opinion).

true state of the world in this case. The reason for saying that my presentation was amazing in the second case, although you did not think that, is because, before you even say anything, you consider how I will take it. Since in this second case you only have the prosocial goal of making me feel good, you choose an expression that you think will make me feel good even though it does not correspond to your actual opinion, because communicating that opinion is not your goal this time (you have no informational goal). Note that, as the above explanation shows, the Pragmatic speaker (S1 in Figure 1) already has a representation of the Literal listener (L0) in their mind but that listener does not have a representation of the speaker in theirs (the listener only thinks about the world and about themself). Grice's cooperative speaker is a Pragmatic speaker aiming at "maximally effective exchange of information" (1975/1989: 28), which is an informational goal: because interlocutors expect each other to be truthful, non-literal uses must be signposted and there can be penalties for speaking untruthfully without indicating it.

Of course, in the real world, our goals – as Grice (1975/19899: 28) also predicted but did not elaborate – are hardly ever purely informational or purely prosocial but almost always a mixture of the two and it may not be possible to satisfy both at the same time. When this happens, speakers want to make listeners aware of this conflict, and that, although they cannot meet both types of goals, they do care about both of them. This can be theoretically modelled by adding, in addition to the informational and prosocial goals, a third type of goal, which Yoon et al. (2020: 72) call self-presentational. So, in choosing an utterance, speakers try to strike a balance between three types of goals:

1) An informational goal (to produce an utterance that accurately reflects the state of the world: how likely is the listener to infer the state of the world correctly based on the utterance? – cf. Quality maxim)
2) A prosocial goal (to be kind: how likely is the listener to feel good after hearing the utterance?)
3) A self-presentational goal (to be perceived as polite: how likely is the listener *to think that the speaker* is someone who cares both about the truth and about the listener's feelings based on the utterance?)

We can call this third goal the face-constituting goal and this way of explaining it portrays politeness as instrumental: the reason for being polite to Other (for constituting Other's face) is in order to be thought of well by them in return (to constitute Self's face). This understanding of how face-constituting works reflexively is consistent with the ideas of Goffman (1967), Leech (1983: 82) and others (e.g., Terkourafi

2008)[15] and is the reason why modelling politeness in the RSA requires a sophisticated, second-order speaker.

We can explain the relevant reasoning as follows. By embedding a belief of the listener not about the world or about themself but about the speaker, the self-presentational goal is different from the other two goals because it is reflexive (the speaker has a goal whose ultimate object is the speaker: that they be thought of well by the listener). An S1 speaker, who tries to be both truthful and caring (combine the informational and prosocial goals) but is not driven by a self-presentational goal is inadequate to model politeness, because first-order reasoning misses the element of the speaker directing the listener's thoughts and evaluations back at themself (the speaker) by having the listener think something good about themself (that they are polite). A polite speaker, on the other hand, wants the listener not just to feel good (prosocial goal) but also to realize that the speaker is doing their best to make the listener feel good while being truthful at the same time, and to think well of the speaker for that reason (self-presentational goal). In other words, the polite speaker is someone who the listener perceives as saying (potentially untruthful) things *out of politeness* and not because they believe them (informational goal, in case the speaker is mistaken about the state of the world) or because they are simply trying to make the addressee feel good (prosocial goal). A listener who realizes that the speaker is concerned with how the listener sees them and wants to be thought of well by them, will think that the speaker is polite, and the speaker's self-presentational goal will have been fulfilled. To account for politeness, then, what is needed is a second-order Polite speaker, S2, who is reasoning about how a Pragmatic listener, L1, who is themself thinking about a Pragmatic speaker S1, will think about S2 based on their utterance (Figure 1, bottom diagram).

Now, in order to meet these three goals through language, a speaker must choose among a range of possible expressions that can be used to describe the state of the world. These expressions have different costs attached to them. Yoon et al. (2020) conceptualize cost in terms of length. According to them, "longer utterances are more costly" (2020: 74), which means that, if I have two utterances of the same length, the one that provides less information is more costly. In other words, indirect speech, which by definition provides less information than its direct counterpart of the same or shorter length, is more costly. And because the self-presentational goal imposes extra (reflexive reasoning) requirements that make it more "expensive" compared to the other two goals, in their model this goal can only be met by choosing the more costly alternative, that is, by speaking indirectly. As they put it, "[w]e formalize this

**15** Incidentally, in Terkourafi's (2008) account, speakers can threaten Other's face if that constitutes their own face (most likely in the eyes of some audience), which brings impoliteness/rudeness also under the umbrella of a second-order definition of im/politeness as face-constituting.

notion of self-presentational utility and show that it leads speakers to prefer indirect speech: utterances that provide less information relative to alternatives with a similar meaning" (2020: 72).

To sum up, in the RSA model of politeness, a speaker will first consider the sum of the three goals – informational, social, self-presentational – that they are trying to meet (which may carry different weights in different situations, i.e., one time the informational goal may be foregrounded, another time the prosocial goal, and so on). This sum is the "price" that the speaker must pay in order to meet their goals. The speaker will then look to the expressions available (those that can be used to describe the state of the world) and select among them the one that carries just the right ratio of information-to-length (its cost) to pay this price. In Yoon et al.'s words, "We take the total utility $U_{total}$ of an utterance to be the weighted combination of the three utilities minus the utterance cost $C_u$, which is used to capture the general pressure toward economy in speech" (2020: 74). The next section provides a brief critique of the RSA model of politeness before proceeding to propose an extension that enables it to capture both strategic and non-strategic politeness, as outlined at the end of Section 3.

# 5 Assessing the RSA model of politeness

There are theoretical and empirical reasons why the RSA model of politeness as proposed by Yoon et al. (2020) cannot capture the intuitions regarding the strategic/non-strategic distinction reviewed in Section 2.[16] Starting with the theoretical ones, claiming that politeness always involves reflexive reasoning of the speaker directed at the listener makes speaking politely more effortful than simply speaking pragmatically; S2 has to do more work than S1 to formulate their utterance, as Figure 1 illustrates. In other words, to meet their self-presentational goal, the speaker must expend more effort than otherwise. But is there ever a time when speakers don't have such a self-representational goal? If only some utterances served to constitute face, then the rest of the time face would have to exist outside discourse, making it an individual property of interactants, a property that they have before and independently of entering interaction.[17] This is undesirable because it denies that face is always and continuously brought into existence in and through discourse. To avoid

16 The RSA model of politeness is essentially a probabilistic formalization of Brown and Levinson's (1987) account and, as such, it suffers from the same problems that I have already highlighted in a number of publications (Terkourafi 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005a, 2005b). The interested reader is referred to those publications for a more thorough explanation of the relevant objections.

17 Brown & Levinson's conceptualization of face as wants has been repeatedly criticized for suggesting this.

this, there is no other recourse but to side with Scollon and Scollon (1995: 38), when they write that “there is no face-less communication”. But then, the self-presentational goal is always present and S2 selects their every utterance by taking into account how L1 will view them if they use it. In other words, communication always happens on two levels, consistent with Brown and Levinson’s view of politeness as an additional particularized conversational implicature of a speaker’s utterances. Except that, to avoid making face a property of individuals that pre-exists interaction, this additional PCI must now be attached to each and every utterance. This is not only too effortful but also psychologically implausible in view of the fact that, as we saw in Section 2, only some uses of linguistic expressions get noticed as polite, while many other uses of the same expressions pass “below the radar”, so to speak. If politeness, in the politeness2 sense of constituting face, always requires reflexive reasoning, this difference in salience between strategic and non-strategic uses is lost and their face-constituting aspect should always be noticed for all utterances, on top of their other meaning.

Fortunately, this counterintuitive result can be theoretically avoided. There is another way of accounting for the fact that the face-constituting aspect that all utterances have *a fortiori* only gets noticed in some cases. This is possible if im/politeness (face-constituting) is modelled not as an implicature but as a perlocutionary effect of the speaker’s utterance (the listener’s evaluation of the speaker; Terkourafi 2001, 2003). This evaluation follows automatically when what the speaker says matches what the listener expects them to say under the circumstances. In other words, it is not always necessary for the speaker to calculate what they need to say so that the listener will think well of them, and it is not always necessary for the listener to think about why the speaker formulated it that way. Instead, speakers can select linguistic expressions simply as a matter of habit, because this is what the speaker is used to saying in these circumstances. Conversely, listeners can evaluate expressions as polite because this is what they are used to hearing in these circumstances. In this way, the perlocutionary effect of im/politeness can be achieved on the back of generalized conversational implicatures without rational means-ends calculation by interlocutors. Instead, these politeness generalized conversational implicatures ([GCIs] which, unlike regular GCIs are constrained by some basic contextual parameters; Terkourafi 2005b) are generated when an expression matches what is expected in a situation (what I have called a “frame”; Terkourafi 2001, 2005a, 2005b).

Two provisos are in order here. First, for a speaker to have expectations about what to say in a situation, they must have experienced this situation several times before; similarly, for a hearer to have expectations about what they will hear in a situation, they must also have experienced this situation several times before. In other words, the association of an expression with a context needed to create the politeness GCI as a shortcut to the politeness evaluation is only possible for frequently experienced situations. We can't be expected to have a frame for a situation we haven't experienced before – although in such situations we may well draw on our repertoire of frames based on analogy to put together a semi-novel expression. Second, the speaker's and the hearer's expectations (and hence politeness evaluation) will overlap only to the extent that they have previously experienced the situation in similar ways, that is, to the extent that they have similar *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991). Politeness as a perlocutionary effect of the speaker's utterance generated inadvertently by repeated expression-context co-occurrence is an alternative path to achieving politeness (without communicating it as a particularized implicature) that does not involve the self-presentational goal. For this reason, this alternative way of being polite cannot be captured within the reflexive reasoning account of the RSA model of politeness.

A second, empirical reason why the RSA model of politeness is too limited to account for the intuitions regarding the strategic/non-strategic distinction has to do with how utterance cost is conceptualized. As mentioned in Section 4, Yoon et al. (2020: 74) conceptualize utterance cost in terms of the information-to-length ratio of an utterance: longer utterances conveying the same amount of information are more costly, and so are utterances of the same length conveying less information. This way of conceptualizing cost leaves out other factors that can affect the cost of an expression, such as frequency of use. Through frequent use in a context, an indirect expression (longer than a direct alternative) can become more transparent (informative), reducing its cost *in that context*. This is exactly the situation described at the end of Section 3, where I suggested that, through conventionalization, expressions that can be accounted for as content-based politeness, which formally requires inference, can function as form-based politeness simply because of the recognizability of their form due to its frequent occurrence in that context. In such circumstances, creatively putting together a novel expression will be more costly than reproducing a stock one, even if both expressions formally constitute content-based politeness.

This prediction is borne out empirically in two ways. Firstly, different cultures show a preference for different politeness sub-strategies under the same super-strategy from Brown and Levinson's five-part hierarchy. This is the situation, for instance, with diminutives and with the polite plural in Standard Greek (spoken in urban centres of Greece) and in Cypriot Greek (spoken in urban centres of the island of Cyprus). Both sub-strategies, which fall under Brown and Levinson's negative politeness strategy, are used in more contexts and more frequently overall in the standard variety, with concrete (face-threatening) consequences in the ears of speakers of the non-standard variety, who evaluate them as "hypocritical", "standoffish" or "affected" when they encounter them in these extended contexts

(Terkourafi 1999, 2005c, 2009). The negative evaluation of these sub-strategies by speakers of the non-standard variety follows from the fact that Cypriot Greek does not make as extensive use of these sub-strategies as the standard variety does, even though they are typologically perfectly possible within the language. In terms of the RSA model, these sub-strategies are not suitable to meet the speaker's self-presentational goal in the non-standard variety because they are more costly in that variety (same length for less information when used non-literally, since in Cypriot Greek diminutives and plural address are used mostly literally) compared with the standard one (where frequent use boosts the information value of their non-literal uses, making them less costly). More generally, taking Brown and Levinson's positive politeness strategy as an example, this strategy can be verbally realized by 15 sub-strategies (1987: 102), which are equally indirect in this respect. However, because linguistic expressions are used not only for face-constituting but also for identity and other indexical reasons (Section 2), one culture may use (or use more frequently) only three or four of these sub-strategies, making these sub-strategies more salient (less costly) in speaker/hearers' minds compared to other positive politeness sub-strategies that the culture uses less or not at all. This has concrete consequences for the cost of all the positive politeness sub-strategies in that culture, because those that are more frequently used become automatically less costly (higher information value), while the opposite happens for those that are less frequently used, which become more costly in comparison.

Secondly, other research (reviewed in Terkourafi 2015) has uncovered multiple evidence (elicited, corpus, and developmental) that routinized expressions in their contexts are what is rated as most polite/least impolite, and taught as polite to children and foreign language learners. This corroborates, from a different side, the claim that frequent use affects the cost of an utterance by lowering it, since routinization is, once again, a matter of frequency of use in a context. However, what such research also shows is that, since routinized expressions are more explicitly associated with politeness in ranking tasks and in acquisition and classroom instruction, their polite evaluation has, to some extent, become encoded in them independently of context and is felt to be part of their literal meaning, a kind of immediately recognizable form-based politeness that does not require inference (which is precisely what one might expect in the case of politeness GCIs). This suggests that a reflexive reasoning account involving second-order thinking about how the listener will evaluate the speaker based on their utterance is not necessary when such routinized expressions are used. In the next section, I move toward extending the RSA model of politeness in this direction, building on experimental findings from irony research.

# 6 Extending the RSA model of politeness: lessons from irony research

The RSA model of politeness can begin to capture the above insights about the cost of frequently experienced, routinized expressions (which can lower an utterance's total utility $U_{total}$) by capitalizing on what we know about novel and expected irony from experimental pragmatics research. Summarizing this research, Spotorno and Noveck write:

> Much work in the psycholinguistic literature has focused on the characteristics of the ironic statements' context or on sentential features of ironic statements themselves. In light of mixed results that show that irony reading times are at times slower than, and at other times as fast as, literal readings, these two views have led to a stalemate in the literature. We have argued that once attitude-ascription is taken into consideration, one could anticipate how features of an irony reading task lead to reductions in latencies [faster reading times; MT] over the course of an experimental session. (Spotorno and Noveck 2014: 1660)

What Spotorno and Noveck are referring to as "attitude-ascription" here is the kind of reflexive reasoning attributed to a second-order polite speaker S2 by Yoon et al. (2020; bottom diagram of Figure 1). Even for a phenomenon such as irony, commonly taken to involve several levels of reflexive reasoning, what these authors are, then, claiming is that engaging in reflexive reasoning is not always required but rather depends on how predictable the use of an expression is, given a context, and on individual differences. Specifically, when they constructed their experimental stimuli such that irony consistently co-occurred with a negative event in the context, socially-inclined participants picked up on this cue and as a result recognized ironic interpretations faster in the second part of the experiment compared with the first part. Not socially-inclined participants, however, continued to process ironic statements more slowly than literal statements throughout. Whether a participant is socially-inclined or not, thus, turns out to be an individual difference relevant to the extent to which they will engage in reflexive reasoning. Spotorno and Noveck (2014) explain this finding by pointing out that the consistent association of negative events with irony cued socially-inclined participants to the experimenter's intention, which in turn enabled these participants to develop a cognitive shortcut, within the limits of the experiment, from negative event to ironic interpretation, by-passing the specifics of the situation including the story character's intention each time. Once this regular association was discovered, socially-inclined participants did not waste time reasoning about the goals of the specific speaker portrayed in the story vis-à-vis the specific addressee.

These results are interesting because they show that whether reflexive reasoning, which is essentially an application of Theory of Mind (ToM), needs to be applied or not does not depend solely on the type of phenomenon but can be modulated by other factors, such as predictability and individual differences. Because applying ToM is effortful (as shown by the initial slower processing of ironic vs. literal statements by all participants in Spotorno and Noveck's experiments), we can, given sufficient and consistent input, develop cognitive shortcuts that can speed up the processing of irony when it occurs at expected moments in the discourse (after a negative event). Enlisting of ToM abilities can thus become a matter of degree regulated by aspects of context and of the individual participants themselves. The same could potentially be argued about politeness: once a language user notices, given sufficient and consistent input, an association between a linguistic expression and a context, they will subsequently automatically evaluate this expression as polite (=face-constituting) in that context, without bothering to wonder whether the speaker is trying to be perceived as polite by the listener or not, that is, without going so far as considering the speaker's self-presentational goal.

The attribution of politeness based on expression-context associations also solves another puzzle for the RSA model posed by the empirical evidence adduced at the end of Section 5, namely how come routinized and frequently experienced expressions, which are less costly, as explained there, can be used to "pay" for the more "expensive" self-presentational goal? The way out of this impasse is by allowing that politeness may not always be so expensive to achieve after all. Achieving politeness as a perlocutionary effect may not always involve weighing up one's self-presentational goal against the other two, thereby requiring a second-order speaker S2 reasoning reflexively to be achieved. Instead, it may be achieved by simply picking expressions based on their conventionalized meanings as an S1 speaker might do, and letting those expressions do the rest. If certain routinized, frequently used expressions carry their politeness "up their sleeve", so to speak, as a politeness GCI in some contexts, then all a speaker need do is correctly match the expression to the context and – assuming the same expression-context associations hold for the hearer as well, something the speaker's and hearer's *habitus* should take care of – politeness as a perlocutionary effect can follow without having been consciously aimed at by the speaker and consciously inferred by the addressee. In sum, my argument is that non-strategic politeness (the kind that passes unnoticed) is performed by an S1 speaker, who uses linguistic expressions as they habitually use them, without reflexively reasoning about what the listener will think about them if they use these expressions in this way. The evidence discussed in the last two sections supports this claim.

# 7 Summary and implications for further research

Several terms and distinctions discussed in the im/politeness literature, including discernment versus volition, social indexing versus strategic politeness, bivalent versus trivalent politeness, and politeness as social accelerator versus break, hint at different flavours of linguistic politeness without, however, being able to agree whether this is a matter of form versus content and how we might be able to distinguish between those different flavours in a principled way. After reviewing these distinctions and, in turn, distinguishing them summarily from a new distinction between form-based and content-based politeness, which I propose as orthogonal to them, I identified as their common intuition the fact that, while all linguistic expressions are polite in a second-order sense of having impact on face, certain uses of linguistic expressions are noticed as polite while others are not. In this article, the terms "strategic" and "non-strategic" are used to refer to these two flavours of politeness understood as a difference in the degree to which politeness is noticed each time.

To formalize this intuition, I turned to the Rational Speech Act model of politeness (Yoon et al. 2020), which provides a probabilistic account of politeness as a speaker's reflexive reasoning about how the listener will evaluate them based on their utterance. However, the RSA model of politeness as proposed is unable to account for non-strategic politeness as defined in this article. To account for this, I proposed to reconceptualize the strategic/non-strategic distinction as a continuum and to correspondingly extend the RSA model of politeness to cover this continuum by allowing different paths to achieving politeness, not all of which require reflexive reasoning on behalf of speakers. Instead, to what extent a speaker engages in reflexive reasoning when perceived as speaking politely depends on the context and on individual differences.

At one end of this continuum, strategic im/politeness involves full-fledged reflexive reasoning à la Yoon et al. (2020) by a Polite speaker S2 about an internalized Pragmatic listener L1, who in turn reasons about an internalized Pragmatic speaker, S1, and infers the state of the world *s* given S1 chose utterance *u*. However, this is costly and slows down processing. Given face concerns are always present in interaction (there is no faceless communication), language users look for ways to reduce this cost. One way to do that is to use an expression both speaker and hearer expect given the context, and which they evaluate as polite (=face-constituting) because of this. When the incoming expression matches what the listener expects given the context, this signals to the listener that the speaker is in some way like them, part of a collective Self to whom they both belong (Terkourafi 2001: 142–143), leading the listener to evaluate the speaker positively because of that. In this way, im/

politeness becomes attached as lexical (or literal) meaning to certain expressions when used in a matching context. So, always following the terminology of Yoon et al. (2020), at the other end of the continuum, we find non-strategic im/politeness, which involves a Pragmatic speaker, S1, thinking about a Literal listener, L0, who would correctly infer the state of the world *s* given the literal meaning of *u* (which in this case includes its conventionalized face-constituting potential as a GCI always attached to *u*, *all else being equal*).

Zooming out of im/politeness to pragmatics research more generally, ongoing research in a probabilistic vein, such as the Rational Speech Act model, proposes a picture where interlocutors are modelled as rational agents trying to infer each other's goals. However, this picture is limiting, in that it treats language users' rationality in a vacuum and the encoded meanings of linguistic expressions in terms of their information-to-length ratio, neglecting the fact that such meanings can become more transparent (carry increased informational value) and hence less costly through frequent use (but only in some contexts). Im/politeness research can enrich this picture, by showing that what is needed is not only reflexive reasoning about each other's goals (strategic im/politeness) but also attention to the ways these are habitually discharged (non-strategic im/politeness). Language users do not operate in a social vacuum; rather, they exploit the cues to interpretation that their environment offers (in this case, regular associations between expressions and contexts) to lower their processing costs for an activity as mundane as monitoring how others see them. Exploring how to model the continuum from strategic to non-strategic im/politeness opens up fascinating new avenues for research in pragmatics more broadly.

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# Bionote

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Marina Terkourafi is a sociolinguist and pragmatician interested in questions of meaning from a theoretical and cross-cultural perspective. She originally developed the frame-based approach to politeness (PhD, Cambridge, 2001), where she argued that speakers' intentions are secondary in determining an utterance's politeness import, other things like the interlocutors' shared social background (or habitus) taking precedence in determining perceptions of politeness. She has since expanded this work to consider additional sources of meaning occasioned by a speaker's utterance. She is a former co-editor in chief of the *Journal of Pragmatics* and holds the chair of sociolinguistics at Leiden University, The Netherlands.