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► **To cite this version:**

Sandrine Sorlin. The power of impoliteness: a historical perspective. Denis Jamet and Manuel Jobert. Aspects of Linguistic Impoliteness, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp.45-58, 2013. <halshs-01271431>

HAL Id: halshs-01271431

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01271431v1>

Submitted on 7 Apr 2021

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The power of impoliteness: a historical perspective

Sandrine Sorlin

Introduction

Throughout the ages the word “politeness” has taken on various meanings. At the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, it was not to be understood as we know it today. At the time it would seem it was closer to its Latin etymological origin *politus*, signifying uniformed, smooth and polished. Thus, being “polite” meant being “refined” as opposed to being “vulgar”, “barbarian” or “uncivilized”. The Italian word *pulitezza/politezza* insists on this notion of elegance and cleanliness as well. “Polite” also shares common links with *polis* (the city), which brings us to perceive politeness as a social and political phenomenon going beyond the idiosyncrasy of one individual’s language or attitude. Furthermore, the word “politics” is etymologically linked to “politeness” as it too originates from *polis*. This paper thus proposes an interpretation of (im)politeness as part of a socio-political ideology that emerged at the beginning of 18th-century England and that can be said to have a modern counterpart in the political correctness phenomenon of the 20th-21st centuries. To be politically correct is indeed to abide by a renewed collective code of politeness. Just as English people had to watch their language if they wanted to be part of the “polite society” in the 18th century, avoiding offensive language today is a requirement to be seen as politically correct. These linguistic codes of conduct both rely on a similar form of censorship that we shall examine.

If linguistic censoring and uniformity seem to be part and parcel of politeness, *impoliteness* could thus be perceived more positively than it commonly is. Even linguistics tends to always define it as a violation of cooperative rules. Yet the resort to impolite language may have different objectives. As we shall see in a first part, there seems to be some potential subversive power inherent to impoliteness, which explains why it has been the target of a particular social class in England from the 18th century until today. We shall then highlight the parallels we perceive between politeness and political correctness (in the US and then Europe), before giving a new definition to impoliteness that would make it a positive non-conformist resisting force.

I. Impoliteness as a threat to power

The ideal of a polite and refined society, characterized by good taste and noble manners, was promoted in 17th and 18th century England. It extended to all cultural arts: people would speak of

“polite arts”, “polite buildings” or “polite learning”.¹ However, this aspiration to “politeness” cannot be distinguished from a yearning for power, be it social or political. The emergence of politeness is indeed concurrent with the emergence of the middle class. Asserting a moral code supported by a polite language devoid of bad and vulgar words was indeed a means for the gentlemanly to distinguish themselves from the lower classes and thus to establish their authority and power. As Tony McEnery underlines, the condemnation of bad language in plays for instance did not come from the clergy at that time but from the “aspirant” middle classes. Impure language was one of the vices that had been deemed responsible for the Civil War and the death of Charles I. The Restoration offered the possibility for a reform of manners that would bring order back to the country and the middle classes intended to take part in the construction of this new polite order.² They notably formed religious societies like the Society for the Reformation of Manners (SRM) and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) that took it upon themselves to persecute those indulging in immoral bad language in the public sphere.³ In charity schools, the SPCK aimed at teaching poor pupils a moral code that reminded them of their duties to superiors.⁴

Thus politeness came to define the gentleman anew, correlating social status and linguistic forms.⁵ This new elitist linguistic ideal strongly contributed to a partition of society along social lines. Richard Watts clearly follows this line when he asserts that politeness was the discourse “through which the British class system came into being”: “Politeness was instrumental in creating and maintaining a strictly hierarchical and elitist social structure, and it was used as a means of enforcing social differences”.⁶ By establishing normalized polite ways of speaking, linguistic politeness found its way into standard English as it was recorded in prescriptive grammars. As the 18th century unfolded, grammars became more and more practical, addressing themselves to the middle classes wishing to acquire a refined English and thus become members of the “polite” society. The link between polite

1 Laurence E. Klein, “Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England”, *The Historical Journal*, vol 32, No. 3 (september 1989), p. 583. The rise of polite values signals a renewed celebration of ancient Greece and Rome considered as the “politest” nations. Though politeness was first the privilege of the courts, it was then “transferred in the later seventeenth century to the English gentleman and his culture” (p. 585).

2 Tony McEnery, *Swearing in English. Bad Language, Purity and Power from 1586 to the Present*, London & New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 81-82.

3 To do so, they resorted to already existing laws such as “The Blasphemy Act of 1650”. Their movement attracted support from the establishment (*ibid.*, p. 90).

4 The working-class children were taught their place by a supposedly morally superior middle class, justifying its position in a most circular manner: “The assertion of the social authority of the middle classes reinforced the right to dictate a moral code to the children, while simultaneously the supposed superiority of their moral code justified their higher position in society” (*ibid.*, p. 95).

5 “Without renouncing the traditional criteria of gentility (such as land, pedigree and public service), the language of politeness foregrounded what one could call the expressive accomplishments of this gentleman, whether in the social or the cultural sphere” (Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 588).

6 Richard J. Watts, *Politeness. Key Topics in Sociolinguistics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 34.

and standard language is made manifest in the grammarian Robert Lowth's conception of correct use: thanks to his grammar, social climbers would “gain some ‘practice in the polite world’ and to aim for ‘propriety’ as well as accuracy, otherwise they will reveal themselves as members of the ‘vulgar’ in their ‘barbarous’ use of language”.⁷ Once recorded in grammars, the standard “polished” language was presented as the neutral unmarked linguistic yardstick by which to measure all other forms. It is but a small step to conceiving it as “natural” or “naturally” superior. Anthony Ashley-Cooper (third Earl of Shaftesbury), who was instrumental in promoting the “philosophy of politeness”, presented good taste not as socially codified norms, but as an *innate* “attribute of the gentleman”.⁸ Thus linguistic forms that differed from the “pure”, polished language were perceived as illegitimate. Rude and bad language was regarded as an offense to the linguistic law and, through extension, to law and order. If polite language was promoted to ensure a certain political order, it also served a political agenda: Shaftesbury's philosophy of politeness for instance clearly aimed at promoting the whigs.⁹ Historically, from the 17th to the 20th centuries, linguistic impoliteness has been used as a pretext to condemn not language *per se* but those using it. At the beginning of the 17th century, Francis Bacon saw in the indiscipline of those using licentious speech a threat to the Jacobean order, clearly assimilating linguistic order and political order: when he was Lord Chancellor of England (1618-1621) numerous arrests were carried out in his attempt to put an end to freedom of expression.¹⁰ Interestingly, bad language has tended to come to the forefront when the political and social status quo has been threatened. At the beginning of the 20th century, at a time of great social unrest in a country which was very much socially divided, the non-standard dialects were again perceived as “barbarous” in England with their discording, unpolished sounds generating social fear and repulsion. The solution suggested at the time in order to re-establish political and linguistic order was to civilize/polish the barbarians, by imposing them standard English through prescriptive grammars: then they would be fully permitted inside the city (the *polis*).¹¹

What these too brief examples illustrate is that those who protest against bad words are quite conscious of the potential power of impoliteness to contest the political order or the social status quo.

7 See Richard J. Watts, “From polite to educated language: the re-emergence of an ideology”, in Richard Watts and Peter Trudgill (eds), *Alternatives Histories of English*, London & New York, Routledge, 2002, p. 159. Watts makes clear that the upper classes just pretended to be willing to offer access to the polite society while doing everything they could to keep the middle classes out (p. 167).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

9 He perceived the Tories as a “malignant” party, dispensing “poisonous principles” under false religious pretenses. The Tories would claim for themselves a “supposed superiority in matters of social and literary culture” that Shaftesbury was not willing to grant them (Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 604-605).

10 Robert E. Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Language in 17th Century England: Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*, London, Associated University Press, 1995, p. 75-76.

11 See Tony Crowley, *Standard English and the Politics of Language*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 201. This was indeed the radical solution adopted by the Newbolt report in 1921.

This is also something which McEnery very interestingly attracts our attention to. He shows that in the 1960s, at a time when the BBC was loosening its reigns on pure standard English, allowing other accents on the air and other social classes to be represented, there was a strong reaction against the bad words used in some of the programs. Here too the focus on linguistic impoliteness must be understood as part of a more general fear of seeing challenged “a centuries-old vision of the moral supremacy of the middle-class in British society”.¹² What is most interesting indeed is that the VALA (the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association) denounced certain programs like *Till Death Us Do Part* while other programs just as impolite or even more so like *Steptoe and Son* in spite of the swearing and bad language it contained (including sexist, homophobic and racist words) drew no complaints. According to McEnery, the differing response to the two programs lies in the fact that however politically incorrect the language of *Steptoe and Son* was, it did not aim at “undermining” the discourse of power. On the contrary, the prejudices therein were “reinforc[ing] the discourse of power”, so the VALA was not going to find fault with it.¹³ Linguistic impoliteness thus constitutes a problem when it is perceived as an assault against authority but is deemed as perfectly fine when it merely reflects the language of the working class.

These few examples highlight the hypocrisy underlying the denunciation of impolite language on moral grounds when its intents are social and/or political. For one thing, the separation between the polite gentleman and the uncivilized worker is too neat to reflect linguistic reality. Besides, persecution against impolite and immoral usage seemed to have been restricted to one class only in the 18th century, leaving some members of the upper classes free to swear with complete impunity.¹⁴ The hypocrisy underpinning the conception of impoliteness is epitomized in the response Samuel Johnson gave to a woman thanking him for excluding all rude words from his 1755 *English Dictionary*: “so you’ve been looking for them, have you Madam?”.¹⁵

II. From polished to politically polite language

We could argue that the modern politically correct phenomenon is in some respects an avatar of the polished language advocated by the middle classes (through laws, religious societies or charity schools). Naturally the differences between the ideology of politeness we have referred to and political

12 McEnery, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 131-137.

14 Defoe was one of those denouncing the social selection of the SRM : “Defoe likened the application of the laws against immorality to a cobweb which let through the big flies, but caught all the little ones” (McEnery, *ibid.*, p. 108).

15 Bill Bryson, *The Mother Tongue. English and How It Got that Way*, New York, Perennial, 2001, p. 220.

correctness are numerous. First it has less to do with the aspiration of one class to ideological hegemony over another than it has to do with identity.¹⁶ However, the struggle of the middle classes for recognition can be compared to the American and European minorities' struggle for social recognition. If the language of politeness brought the class system "into being", it could be argued to some point that the language of political correctness brought the identities of the minorities "into being". Compelled to pay attention to the language they use, people have been led to observe the prejudices that underlie their language and the ideological assumptions it conveys. Political correctness has indeed brought individuals to become aware of their own responsibility towards linguistic use in their consideration of others. In this sense, political correctness is perfectly in line with the new definition that has been given to the concept of politeness at the turn of the 20th century when "[it] shifted ground [...] to refer to social behaviour displaying mutually shared forms of consideration for others regardless of the social class from which the interactants come".¹⁷ The use of a polished language which has been deprived of its offensive connotations aims at protecting minorities from linguistic face-threatening acts and discrimination.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that the creation of a new linguistic code has the same categorizing effect as the language of politeness of the 18th century. To be recognized, the minorities need state support and notably legal support. As Judith Butler makes clear, resorting to state power to prosecute hateful words, just as religious societies resorted to laws to help them in their linguistic prosecution, ends up giving the state the power to legislate on what can be said and what cannot: "the state actively produces the domain of publicly acceptable speech, demarcating the line between the speakable and the unspeakable, and retaining the power to make and sustain that consequential line of demarcation".¹⁸ In a way it imposes a sort of linguistic censorship that tends to delimit "the social domain of speakable discourse".¹⁹ Censorship is not merely privative in that it forbids some words that are judged "impolite" or "offensive", it is also "productive": the regulation of speech tends to "produce subjects".²⁰ Just as the language of politeness in the 18th century demarcated different categories of subjects, politically correct labels tend to lock minorities in a particular category, a marker of their belonging. This linguistic labeling is very convenient for politicians resorting to the polite labels as a way to pay lip-service to the social desire for recognition of the minorities without delving into the real problems the

16 According to Edward Stourton, the emergence of political correctness (PC from then on) is concomitant with the "arrival of a politics of identity in place of a politics of ideology". For him, we have not yet measured and "worked out the implications of the change" (Stourton, *It's a PC World. What It means to Live in a Land Gone Politically Correct*, Londres, Hodder & Stoughton, 2008, p. 131).

17 Richard Watts, "From polite to educated language: the re-emergence of an ideology", *op. cit.*, p. 168.

18 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, New York & London, Routledge, 1997, p.77.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 133.

20 *Ibid.*

minorities are confronted with, thus avoiding tackling oversensitive issues.²¹ There lies the risk for PC to turn into an ideology of politeness that might become a form of social control—the exact opposite objective sought by the minorities. As Diane Ravitch strongly exemplifies, as the publishing industry has given in to a polished form of language which will offend no minority, the PC ideology has insidiously invaded the school curriculum in the US. Ravitch stands up against this uniformising language that she calls the “language-police”: “The linguistic and ideological conformity that has been imposed on the American educational publishing industry is an outrage. It insults the dignity and integrity of those who work in publishing. It destroys the possibility of freedom of thought and expression. It creates a formula to which every writer must adhere, or risk rejection and failure”.²²

Linguistic protection turns into imposed uniformity as one is supposed to abide by the new polite labels. Certain words must be banished from correct speaking if one does not want to be classified as an impolite, ill-mannered, sexist or racist subject. Indeed what is at stake here is the politicising of language: the use of some words have become political, making it impossible for you to use language as it was used up to the emergence of the phenomenon. Just as the highly political language of politeness in the 18th century ended up presenting itself as the only neutral and correct way of speaking, the highly political PC has come to embody a neutral way of referring to minorities, making other ways of referring to them uncivil and incorrect/impolite. Like the polite language of the past, this politically marked language has gradually become the only words it is safe to resort to. We understand why some commentators have linked PC to 17th century puritanism in the new moral code of politeness it tends to impose : “‘a strong strain of moral self-righteousness’ [...] ‘has often been PC’s most characteristic voice’”.²³ The modern version of politeness that PC represents ends up creating a linguistic consensus rendering impossible any real debate. Here, as it merely aims at avoiding conflicts and eventually maintaining the status quo, any ethical consideration for others seems to be no more than a mere linguistic political smokescreen. In this respect, could we not say that linguistic impoliteness may embody a refusal to give in to existing authoritative linguistic practices and subjection?

21 For instance, calling a woman chairing a session “chair” rather than “chairman” is to recognize women’s aspiration to equality but not doing anything about equal pay.

22 Diane Ravitch, *The Language Police. How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, New York, Vintage Books, 2004, p. 48-49.

23 Suart Hall, quoted by Stourton, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

III. Positive impoliteness

We have seen how (im)politeness partakes of a social and political classification linked to power. More than (im)polite language per se, it is who evaluates whose language that should be considered. Construing impoliteness differently would imply a shift from a moral view of language to an ethical conception of interactions where meanings keep being renegotiated. We will thus operate a reversal of the good and bad moral polarities traditionally given to politeness and impoliteness. The doxa indeed perceives politeness as a quality making it possible to cooperate peacefully with other willing interactants. Impoliteness is here the reverse of polite behaviour. Pushed to its extreme, impoliteness verges on insults, that is to say overt face-threatening acts that intend to injure the other. We agree with the distinction made by Richard Watts between *politic behaviour* which corresponds to non-salient polite linguistic forms you would expect in given circumstances and *politeness* which he describes as something that is in excess of what is normally expected. In this new definition, politeness can sometimes be seen as a deliberate linguistic veiling of one's real intentions. As we saw above, even the politically correct phenomenon can be used by politicians as a polite smokescreen behind which they hide. Thus politeness may embody a form of covert (conscious or unconscious) manipulation, as it pretends to seek consensus, in order to conceal other purposes. In this context, the virtue of impoliteness would be to unveil this excessive, false politeness. But we shall differ on the definition Watts gives of impoliteness. Indeed he defines it as "a linguistic resource absent from [...] the linguistic structures of politic behaviour".²⁴ We would suggest however that impoliteness too can be interpreted as a form of excess and not merely as the opposite of politic behaviour.

It would appear in fact that at least two forms of positive impoliteness might be brought to the forefront.²⁵ On the one hand, as sociolinguists in Labov's wake have highlighted, the formulaic terms of address used by black American young males appear to many white Americans as impolite and abusive, although they are not perceived as such by the speakers themselves. First, ritual abuse is here a form of protest against established authority as it clearly shows a social class consciousness. What may seem rude is in fact an open language that brings taboos out in the open:

24 Watts, *Key Topics in Sociolinguistics. Politeness, op. cit.*, p. 152. Using Werkhofers terminology, he sees politeness as "payment in excess": "Politic behaviour consists in 'paying' with linguistic resources what is due in a socio-communicative verbal interaction. Politeness, I maintain, is used to 'pay' more than would normally be required in the ritual exchange of speech acts" (p. 115).

25 "Positive" is here to be taken literally (it has nothing to do with Brown and Levinson's positive and negative face/politeness). Negative excessive impoliteness would here verge on insults having no productive results as it merely contributes to reducing the interlocutor to silence (it can however lead to negotiation and counter-interpellation if the insulted person refuses the place the other's impolite language assigns him/her, in which case the distinction between positive and negative impoliteness becomes blurred). Even "negative" impoliteness can indeed have its virtues (see Butler below).

Through their ritual insults the Harlem men groups experiment creatively with such frequently 'tabooed' subjects as sex and death, and theft and poverty, and in doing so bring to light such social developments and possibilities as strong matrifocal families or the effects of labelling poverty as shameful, which are otherwise hardly recognised as worthy of discussion by the wider society.²⁶

As a matter of fact the black Americans use insulting words on purpose because they are repellent to white society.²⁷ What David Parkin insists on is the "interpretative potential of these words" that tends to "provoke comment and argument" in a community where verbal skills are much highly valued, especially when they bring new ideas.²⁸ Through excessive impoliteness, new forms of address are created besides existing idiomatic pattern of language.²⁹

There are other, less ritualised forms of positive impoliteness. We might here gather all the cases of deliberate impoliteness aiming either at shocking, denouncing moral censorship, exposing the hypocrisy of polite discourse, exploiting the potential of impolite language for social transformation, etc. As Butler aptly exemplifies, censorship tends to muzzle the linguistic arms of rebellion: "the efforts to tighten the reins on speech undercuts those political impulses to exploit speech itself for its insurrectionary effects".³⁰ In the ideal polite world produced by the American bias and sensitivity committee supposed to select texts for educational tests, nothing can be said anymore on anything. Diane Ravitch shows that the US school books are composed of insipid documents blunting children's capacity to react and debate : "The only problem was that all this activism had made the textbooks dull. Studies showed that they also had a simpler vocabulary, that they had been dumbed down at the same time that they were being 'purified'. With everything that might offend anyone removed, the textbooks lacked the capacity to inspire, sadden, or intrigue their readers".³¹ The censorship of rude and offensive language can but have counter-productive results, as in the case of the banning of violent rap songs (like those of Ice T for instance) that was asked in the 1990s by Americans who were offended by the amount of bad words used.³² In actual fact, offensive language can only be worked through and

26 David Parkin, "The Creativity of abuse", *Man*, New Series, vol 15, n.1, March 1980, p. 61. He quotes Labov's work on ritual insults among urban Black American young males, giving examples of insults like when A says to B that his family is poor and hungry "to which B ripostes by saying that it was A who ate all their provisions" (voir Labov, "Rules for ritual insults", in *Language in the inner city*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1972, p. 317).

27 Parkin, *ibid.*, p. 62.

28 *Ibid.*.

29 "novel combinations even though they may later become idiomatic or ritualised, achieve their initial effect by juxtaposition with fixed expressions" (*ibid.*, p. 65).

30 Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

31 Ravitch, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

32 "The aggressive reappropriation of injurious speech in the rap of say, Ice T becomes a site for a traumatic reenactment of injury, but one in which the terms not only mean or communicate in a conventional way, but are themselves set forth as discursive items, in their very linguistic conventionality and, hence, as both forceful and arbitrary, recalcitrant and

resignified through repetition according to Butler³³: “Keeping such terms unsaid and unsayable can also work to lock them in place, preserving their power to injure, and arresting the possibility of a reworking that might shift their context and purpose”.³⁴ Besides, in certain contexts, “impoliteness” can be deemed as the best means to get one's meaning across. When Marianne Faithfull used the word “cunt” in 1979 for the first time in a song (“Why'd Ya Do It?”³⁵), it was for her the most appropriate word to express the hurt she was trying to come to terms with after her lover cheated on her.

The potential force of excessive impoliteness would here reside in its power to expose the boundaries of existing legitimate speech and thus to open the way for its potential shaking-up and resignification. Using “illegitimate” or “immoral” language can slowly subvert mainstream conceptions and create new contexts in which what has been considered as illegitimate up to now comes to be authorized: here lies the power of excessive impoliteness. The grid below makes a difference between non salient (doxical) and salient impoliteness which can be of at least two kinds:

← Excessive impoliteness	Non salient impoliteness	Excessive impoliteness →
Ritual (and inventive) abuse in formulaic exchanges denouncing white power and social realities	Absence of polite formulas expected in a given culture. Un-politic behaviour	Not expected deliberate impoliteness against established forms of power

If the left hand side of the grid deals with more or less *expected* linguistic rites, the right-hand side focuses on the *unexpectedness* of impoliteness in non-conventionalized ways bringing about potential change and renewal. The two extremities of the grid join up though in the linguistic innovation and playfulness they can bring about. The middle part centralises what we might call non-salient impoliteness, considered as a violation of the linguistic laws of politic behaviour as they are learned and practised in a given culture. *Un-politic* behaviour is the absence of linguistic polite structures that were expected whereas (non ritual) excessive impoliteness is on the opposite the formulation of something in excess of what was expected.

open to reuse” (Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 100).

33 “That such language carries trauma is not a reason to forbid its use. There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous efforts it takes to direct the course of repetition” (*ibid.*, p. 38).

34 *Ibid.*

35 The word appeared in the line “Every time I see your dick I imagine her cunt in my bed” (See McEnery 118). McEnery also recalls that she was the first woman to use the word “fuck” in the 1968 film “I’ll Never Forget What’s Name” (p. 118).

Conclusion

Linguistics seems to have been less interested in potentially disruptive impoliteness than in consensual politeness, as it has tried to discover the different linguistic and pragmatic strategies adopted to maintain harmony among interactants.³⁶ As Richard Watts underlines, these studies rely on the assumption that harmony is what is looked for, that “friction” *is* “undesirable”.³⁷ But the friction implied by impoliteness can bring positive benefits in addressing hurtful matters for example or exposing the boundaries of legitimate speech to better question them. Besides, impolite language sometimes has an inventive aspect to it that might at some point in time enter standard language. In taking no interest in forms of impoliteness that can bring about social change through conflict or subversion, can linguistics be said to be a party to the political status quo? In any case, in establishing a cooperative code of conduct in which impolite moves are merely perceived as violations, one can but fail to consider the virtues of impoliteness as a powerful pragmatic force, allowing interlocutors to renegotiate meaning.

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36 Brown and Levinson, Leech or Fraser have all adopted Grice's Cooperative Principle as their background theory, describing politeness as an implicature (except for Fraser's *Politeness Principle* which sees politeness not as a deviation but, on the contrary, as something that you expect and anticipate; for him impoliteness—and not politeness—is considered as a violation of conversational norms). For a synthesis of the different theories on politeness, see Mark Kingwell, “Is it Rational to be Polite?”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 90, No. 8 (Aug., 1993), p. 387-404.

37 Watts, *Politeness. Key Topics in Sociolinguistics, op. cit.*, p. 50. For Watts, an abstract and ideal model cannot be appropriate for the description of social behaviour: “It should not be the aim of a theory of (im)politeness to set up a model with which we can either predict when and how speakers of a language will produce linguistic politeness or describe linguistic expressions which have been produced as examples of linguistic politeness” (p. 160).