

Politeness and Culture

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Very often when discussing the manifestations of politeness in various cultures, the views of cultures are very homogenising. It is assumed that all of the speakers of a particular language, who are elided with all members of that culture, use the same forms of politeness and have the same positive views about politeness (Japanese and English are seen as negative politeness cultures and America, Greece and Australia are seen as positive politeness cultures). This ignores the contested nature of politeness norms within cultures and languages. Working class and middle class communities within Britain do not necessary have the same `take' on politeness and evaluation of for example negative politeness. The notion of bad manners or impoliteness is often associated with a class and educational dimension (see for example, the use of honorifics in Japanese). Women are stereotypically associated with certain styles of politeness (whether they are in fact more polite than men is highly debatable). However, if certain sections of the population because of class and gender have different views of politeness and have different style of politeness available to them, we need to question the generalisations that we make about cultures having particular styles of politeness and be explicit about whose politeness norms we are describing. This paper sets out to investigate how we can describe general patterns in politeness use within particular languages as a resource which will be differently evaluated by particular groups within that culture, without assuming that the culture as a whole is homogeneous.