

## The muddier side of politeness: Appropriation, control & enforcement

*El inextricable lado de la cortesia: Apropiación, control y aplicación*

**ABSTRACT:** Everyday politeness behaviour is all too often seen as unproblematic if interactants just adhere to the socially established norms and maxims of behaviour and remember to say their 'pleases' and 'thank yous'. In developing and consolidating social relationships and engaging in amicable and cordial interaction, participants are expected to demonstrate respect, be tactful, show good manners and remain attentive to the needs of others. However, when engaging in politeness behaviour, interlocutors do not always participate on a level communicative playing field since they may have to negotiate class interests, confront individual self-interest and negotiate perceived hypocrisy. This can be seen as the murkier side of politeness and reflects the use and abuse of interpersonal and transactional power.

This article examines how interactants negotiate politeness practices that are employed to appropriate, manipulate and enforce to achieve societal, group and personal objectives. To understand this murkier side of politeness, research has been undertaken with Mexican Spanish speakers who have been asked to reflect on how they navigate daily interpersonal and transactional encounters. The results indicate that far from reflecting routine and automatic responses, politeness behaviour is often evolving, dynamic and reactive depending on the individual social context.

**KEYWORDS:** *Politeness; Power; Negotiation; Interpersonal; Transactional.*

**RESUMEN:** Con demasiada frecuencia, el comportarse de manera educada de manera cotidiana no se considera problemático si los interactuantes se adhieren a las normas y máximas de comportamiento socialmente establecidas y recuerdan decir sus "por favor" y "gracias". Al desarrollar y consolidar relaciones sociales y participar en una interacción amistosa y cordial, se espera que los participantes demuestren respeto, tengan tacto, que muestren buenos modales y permanezcan atentos a las necesidades de los demás. Sin embargo, cuando adoptan un comportamiento de cortesía, los interlocutores no siempre participan en igualdad de condiciones comunicativas, ya que pueden tener que negociar intereses de clase, confrontar intereses individuales y negociar hipocresía percibida. Esto puede verse como el lado más problemático de la cortesía y refleja el uso y abuso del poder interpersonal y transaccional.

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Este artículo examina cómo los interactuantes negocian prácticas de cortesía que se emplean para apropiarse, manipular e imponer para lograr objetivos sociales, grupales y personales. Para comprender este lado más problemático de la cortesía, se llevó a cabo una investigación con hispanohablantes mexicanos a quienes se les ha pedido que reflexionen sobre cómo se manejan y desenvuelven en sus encuentros interpersonales y transaccionales diarios. Los resultados indican que, lejos de reflejar respuestas rutinarias y automáticas, el comportamiento que comprende la cortesía evoluciona constantemente, es dinámico y reactivo según el contexto social individual.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Cortesía; Poder; Negociación; Interpersonal; Transaccional.*

## Introduction

Politeness behaviour offers an interactional blueprint in a given society since it reflects accepted social attitudes, values and norms. When interacting in society, participants usually aim to project their positive *face* which reflects ‘approved social attributes’ (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). They will often want to be seen as helpful, attentive and cooperative interactants with respect to the needs of others. In Mexican Spanish-speaking society, this is often described in terms of *buenos modales* (good manners) *educación* (upbringing) and *urbanidad* (civility) which are often expressed in terms of *ser servicial* (anticipating others’ needs), *dar su lugar* (acknowledging others’ social status), *hacer el bien* (helping others altruistically) and *acomodarse* (ready to help whenever needed). These practices can provide a well-trodden path to achieving successful societal participation. However, such practices are built on the understanding that other interactants hold the same values and priorities and are willing to work together in order to achieve them. The reality is that politeness behaviour reflects the assumed rules of interaction but not core motivation behind engaging in politeness behaviour. Just as Goffman argues regarding face, politeness also reflects ‘the traffic rules of social interaction; one learns

about the code the person adheres to in his movement across the paths and designs of others, but not where he is going, or why he wants to get there. One does not even learn why he is ready to follow the code, for a large number of different motives can equally lead him to do so’ (1967, p. 12). Therefore, politeness behaviour should not be automatically associated with having good intentions, showing sincere interest or striving for the communal good. Whilst superficially politeness reflects adherence to normative conventional behaviour, it may be enacted for instrumental and transactional purposes.

In examining this potentially murkier side of politeness, this article builds on Austin (1990) and her examination of manipulative non-cooperative behaviour. We examine how apparently benevolent face acts intend to disrupt or undermine harmonious relationships. To achieve this aim, we study politeness in terms of imposition, self-interest, hypocrisy and conflict. An awareness of this murkier side of politeness provides insights into how seemingly collaborative and rapport-building activities can be manipulated to promote self-interest and work against both societal and interpersonal good.

The article is structured in the following way. First of all, we examine the manipulative dimension to politeness in societal, individualistic and interpersonal terms. We then describe research methodology methods, which involved a series of interviews conducted with Mexican participants who were asked to reflect on politeness patterns and practices. We present and analyse the findings in terms of prosocial, interpersonal and contested politeness. The conclusions highlight how participants engage in choice, opposition and resistance when deciding to interact with other interlocutors.

#### Social order and control

Politeness practices and patterns characteristically can be seen as the glue that keeps society together so that, on an interactional level, interpersonal and transactional encounters can run as smoothly and as predictably as possible. By adhering to the social norms of demonstrating respect and consideration for others and recognising others' participatory rights, interlocutors can mutually position each other relatively quickly and avoid having to establish the state of play and particular contextual circumstances when engaging in each and every individual/social encounter. Whilst achieving rapport and comity is clearly the underlying nature of most everyday politeness behaviour (see, for instance, Locher & Watts, 2005), the actual enactment of such practices may also serve to foster and conceal more disturbing communicative intentions such as to promote class interests, advance individual self-interest and engage in double standards. As a consequence, manipu-

lative use of politeness resources can be understood in societal, interpersonal and individualistic terms.

Societally, insistence on the need to adhere to politeness practices and patterns can be seen as one way to reinforce social class distinctions:

One person may be said to have power over another in the degree that he is able to control the behavior of the other. Power is a relationship between at least two persons, and it is nonreciprocal in the sense that both cannot have power in the same area of behavior. The power semantic is similarly nonreciprocal, the superior says *T* and receives *V*.

(Brown & Gilman, 1960, p. 255)

Within this context, politeness practices can be used to make sure that interactants know their social 'place' and standing which may be determined by professional status, age, educational background, gender or mere wealth. Norms and understandings may emerge through the social power and influence granted to a specific group as seen in the British context:

Within Britain, the way we characterise politeness draws largely on the values associated with middle-class, educated people, and we assume that this negative politeness (deferent, respectful, using indirectness) constitutes the politeness norms of the society as a whole. However, working-class people may well rely on other more positive politeness behaviours (while also using

negative politeness as well when the context demands).

(Mills, 2017, p. 105)

Within the Mexican context, social politeness conventions and practices may reflect family values and principles, such as respect for one's elders or acknowledgement of professional status. For instance, the use of the formal *usted* as opposed to informal *tú* may be seen as a societal means of obligating interactants to recognise the superior social status of older adults. Meanwhile, the use of titles such as *ingeniero* (engineer) and *arquitecto* (architect) used before the last name may also be seen to acknowledge expertise or professional studies.

Interpersonally, politeness practices and structures can be used to deceive relational understandings especially with respect to level of genuine interest and distance/closeness. Politeness can be employed to promote self-interest particularly at an institutional level as conversational discourse is more and more found in the public domain (Fairclough, 1992). By adopting informal politeness structures and patterns, public discourse can appear to be more friendly and intimate. This 'synthetic personalisation' (Fairclough, 2010) tries to make the hearer feel unique, special and appreciated: 'This is the simulation of private, face-to-face, person-to-person discourse in public mass-audience discourse – print, radio, television' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 65). Synthetic personalisation can also be found in everyday business transactions i.e. 'the simulation in institutional settings of the person-to-person communication of

ordinary conversation' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 99). It is also to be found in call-centre interactions:

Examples of such practices include offers of assistance ('How can I help you today?') thus potentially implying that the agent wants to help (cf. Márquez Reiter 2011), the provision of self-identification by the telephone agent typically in the form of his or her first name, thus potentially triggering the consumer to proffer his or her name in return (Sacks 1992).

(Márquez Reiter & Bou-Franch, 2017, pp. 663-664)

The use of personalised politeness patterns is primarily aimed at achieving transactional objectives rather than reflecting any genuine interest in the welfare of the addressee. On a separate interpersonal level, mock politeness can be seen as a mismatch between the utterance and the underlying communicative message. In Britain, mock politeness may be expressed through irony and sarcasm (Taylor, 2015, 2016) and misinterpreted sarcastic compliments may include *I know that I can always count on you for helpful advice* and *You really come up with some wonderful ideas*. In the case of Mexican Spanish, mock politeness can be seen through use of T/V pronouns when *usted* may not reflect respect or esteem towards the hearer but rather distancing and even rejection. In the same vein, the use of *tú* may not indicate closeness and affection but rather disrespect in not recognizing the addressee's social standing i.e. *dar su lugar* (acknowledging others' social status).

On an individual level, interactants may adopt their own politeness practices and patterns which may not be apparent to other interactants and, therefore, hearers may misinterpret the politeness strategy. For instance, a given interactant may use formulaic polite language or formal terms of address with everyone he/she meets and, therefore, is not particularly displaying personalised politeness. This, for instance, can be seen through the use of overpoliteness (Watts, 2005), which may signal insincere and exaggerated formality. Addressees may even misinterpret excessive use of politeness structures and fail to understand the underlying communicative use of embellished acts and utterances. In the case of Mexican Spanish, interactants may use the formal *usted* with everyone they meet independently of whether they wish to show respect and acknowledge the other's hierarchical status. Addressees may not be aware of ways of interacting with others.

The foregoing discussion suggests that polite behaviour cannot always be taken at face value and needs to be evaluated within a given communicative context taking into consideration interactants' social behaviour and, if possible, individual mannerisms and behaviour, which will include nonverbal communication such as eye contact, gestures and physical distancing.

### Methodology

To understand how Mexican interactants experience the less pleasant side of polite conduct, a series of interviews were carried out on how young adult Mexicans view the social purpose of politeness, self-image and

self-interest, opposition and resistance regarding behavioural norms.

To undertake the research, two researchers formed four focus groups in which they interacted as participant observers with three other interactants in each group. Employing a semi-structured format, the researchers offered guiding questions as a way to open up conversations between the participants with the aim of encouraging the participants to build on each other's contributions. The research followed a qualitative approach which examined problems of power and politeness especially with respect to conventional practices, individual self-interest, perceived hypocrisy and contested relationships. Rather than being pre-established at the outset of the investigation, these aforementioned categories emerged from three guiding questions:

1. Why are people polite or courteous to others?
2. How is politeness enacted interpersonally?
3. What kind of attitudes do you find to be rude or impolite?

The data were subsequently examined manually with the aim of identifying the participants' own voices rather than attempting to reach a common denominator regarding politeness practices. Analysis tries to highlight individual experience, personal understandings and specific reactions. It would be challenging to adopt this approach through conducting quantitative research.

Rather than probing the participants' own behaviour, which may have made

them uncomfortable, the participant observers asked the other participants to reflect on everyday practices. However, in reality, more often than not, the participants reflected on their own attitudes and behaviour. The first question sought to undercover the societal dimension behind politeness and to what degree interactants felt that it was imposed. The second question adopted a more interpersonal perspective and attempted to uncover individuality and self-interest behind politeness practices. The third question examined contested politeness as interactants were invited to question and reflect on behavioural practices and examine whether they resisted established politeness norms.

The sessions were all conducted in Spanish on Google Meet between June and July 2022. They lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The online format was chosen as a precautionary measure given the health risks still prevalent with respect to Covid-19.

The 12 participants are all middle-class Mexican undergraduate students living in the Guadalajara metropolitan area which is located in western Mexico. Aged between 18 and 30, participants reflect a convenience sample, and, due to this, most of the participants are women since they are a majority in their B.A. programme. We had access and consent from them to participate in this research. Participants were assured that their contributions would be anonymised.

## Results

Following Mugford (2023), the participants' reflections are presented in terms

of dealing with prosocial politeness (behaving in socially acceptable ways), negotiating interpersonal politeness (building, defining and maintaining relationships) and engaging in contested politeness (reflective questioning of relational practices and patterns). Prosocial politeness can also be seen in terms of *politic* or expected behaviour (Watts, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005). Meanwhile interpersonal politeness is similar to *polite* conduct (Watts, 2003; Locher & Watts, 2005).

### Prosocial politeness

Participants generally saw politeness as a way of establishing social order and conducting amiable relationships. For instance, Delia said: '*Si, como lo que se espera que uno haga, yo creo que por cómo funciona nuestra sociedad*' (Yes, how someone is expected to act, I believe it is the result of how our society works). Therefore, politeness provides a degree of certainty and predictability. However, as the focus sessions developed, participants identified the regulatory nature of politeness that often emerges in the family as parents 'teach' children how to be respectable members of society.

*Desde pequeños, como que aprendemos que hay ciertas cosas que se hacen o se tienen que hacer. Tal vez no sabemos por qué, pero las hacemos. Entonces siento que va un poquito como... como por ahí, o sea, de que a veces lo hacemos sin pensar, pero creo que cuando se vuelve consciente sabemos que el ser cortés nos ayuda como a encajar en ciertos espacios sociales (Agata)*

Translation:

Ever since we were children, we learn that there are certain things that are done or that need to be done. We might not know why, but we do them anyway. So I feel that it is something like that, like, sometimes we do them without hesitation, but I think that when we become aware of these practices, we know that being polite will help us to fit into certain social interactions. (Agata)

Rather than reflecting emerging and constructed behaviour, linguistic politeness reflects externally imposed behaviour which includes being told how to interact in *ciertos espacios sociales* (certain social spaces). Politeness provides established ways of participating in society:

*En base a sus modales, a cómo se desenvuelve ya socialmente. No sé. Si están en una comida, como toman los cubiertos. Por ejemplo: también en las pláticas, que su lenguaje no sea grosero; que se dirija a las personas respetuosamente, que diga “por favor”, “gracias”. Ese tipo de palabras a mí me hace ver que es una persona cortés. (Hilda)*

Translation:

Based on their manners, on how someone behaves socially. I don't know. If they are at a dinner, how they use the cutlery. For instance: when having a conversation their language shouldn't be rude or inappropriate; that they refer to others politely and respectfully; that

they say “please”, “thank you.” These types of words and phrases make me notice that someone is polite. (Hilda)

The family environment plays an important and influential role in implementing and maintaining social politeness practices as can be seen when addressing older people:

*... cuando hablas con una persona mayor la tratas con más respeto que quizás con alguien de tu edad y pues mucho de eso depende de lo que te inculcaron en tu casa. (Romelia)*

Translation:

... whenever you talk to an elderly person, you treat them with even more respect than with someone who is around your age, and this mostly depends on how you were raised and taught in your house. (Romelia)

and

*Desde chiquito te dicen así de que “pues tienes que saludar a tu tía bien” y “háblale bien a tu abuelita” o “a tu mamá no se le responde así”. (Hortencia)*

Translation:

Ever since you were a child, they tell you “You have to greet your aunt properly” and “talk to your grandmother respectfully” or “You cannot talk to your mom that way”. (Hortencia)

Therefore, prosocial politeness can be seen to obligate participants to project them-

selves as compliant members of society who demonstrate ‘approved social attributes’ (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Indeed, societal politeness and upbringing are often seen as equal:

*La cortésia y la educación. De hecho, en algún punto hasta pueden considerarse sinónimos, porque como eso que estamos diciendo de “por favor” y “gracias,” creo que engloba ambos conceptos. (Delia)*

Translation:

Politeness and education. In fact, up to a point they can be considered synonyms because saying “please” and “thank you” embraces both concepts. (Delia)

Interpersonal politeness

Participants were quick to acknowledge the role of interpersonal politeness as when interactants explore and co-construct individual and group relationships. Interpersonal politeness will often reflect deliberate choices with respect to how participants want to interact and how they respond to other participants’ actions. For instance, Romelia clearly states her position regarding unconditional politeness behaviour:

*Yo diría que depende de la persona. La única vez que he sido cortés para quedar bien con alguien serían mis suegros. (Romelia)*

Translation:

I would say that it depends on the person. The only time I’ve been polite in

order to get on well with someone was with my in-laws. (Romelia)

Therefore, Romelia is willing to be unconditionally polite to her in-laws, which may reflect self-interest in wanting to get on well with her partner’s parents. (Note that in Mexico, people will refer to their partners’ parents as in-laws even if they are not married or even if they are not planning to get married.)

Interpersonal politeness is often a matter of recognising and reacting to polite behaviour shown by others. This will sometimes mean being critical of perceived hypocritical politeness:

*Siento que habrá personas que si lo digan solo por quedar bien o al aire, que no lo sientan, mientras que otras personas lo sientan de corazón. De que en cualquier mala situación que se encuentra la otra persona, pues tú estás ahí de apoyo y después dependerá de la intención con que cada persona la diga. (Hilda)*

Translation:

I feel there will be people who say anything just to save face with others or say stuff to people just because, without really believing in what they are saying, while others actually do speak from the heart. In any unpleasant situation that the other person is facing, you are there to support them, and then it will depend on the intention in which each person says it. (Hilda)

Interpersonal politeness indicates that politeness strategies reflect deliberate and consciousness decision-making:



*Yo también trato de hacerlo consciente ... pues es como reconocer el esfuerzo y darle lugar al logro que hicieron. (Olga)*

Translation:

I also try to do it consciously... since it is recognizing the effort and giving merit to what they have achieved.  
(Olga)

Conscious reflection can be seen, for instance, in the use of the phrase *las damas primero* (Ladies first). Hilda contemplated:

*Y ya hablado cuando lo he escuchado, concuerdo con lo que dicen mis compañeras de que es más de burla, como, por ejemplo, no sé, algo súper random de que estás en la escuela, vas a pasar a una exposición o lo que sea y tu compañero te dice “las damas primero” para que pases tú primero y como ya es un juego, no sé, es sarcasmo ya en cuestión. Pero te digo, en lenguaje no verbal sigue teniendo esa esencia de caballerosidad. (Hilda)*

Translation:

Talking about when I've heard it, I agree with what my other peers say: that it is said more as derision. For example... I don't know. Something really random: You are at school, you are going to present something or whatever, and one of your male classmates says "ladies first" so that one as a woman goes first. And, since now it's seen as a game, it becomes something sarcastic. But as I tell you, non-verbal language still has that gentlemanlike nature. (Hilda)

The reflection indicates that Hilda does not engage in politeness practices unthinkingly but considers the communicative intention behind acts of courtesy.

Ramona also sets her own perception of politeness and relates being polite to education:

*No precisamente para caer bien, sino por el hecho de tener educación; de ser educado. Que si vas en el transporte público y ves que alguien está cansado o yo qué sé, a una persona de edad avanzada, una señora o un señor, pues le dejas su lugar ¿no? (Ramona)*

Translation:

Not like others but by having *education*; being educated. So if you are taking the public transportation and see someone who's tired or something like that, maybe you see an elderly person: an elderly man or woman, then you give away your seat, don't you? (Ramona)

While some of the participants stated that they would not give away their seat for different reasons, Ramona seems to relate this act to being polite.

Contested politeness

Rather than blindly accepting prosocial politeness practices, participants often act to shape their own politeness practices. This can be seen in terms of opposition and resistance. Furthermore, participants argued that politeness had to be earned by other interactants and was not uncritically granted based on professional status, age, educational background, gender or mere wealth.

For instance, Hortencia is critical of elders who expect her to show respect and consideration based solely on their hierarchical status: ‘Se sienten que merecen el respeto que no se han ganado’ (They feel as if they deserve the respect they had not earned yet). This attitude is echoed by Brisa:

*A pocas personas le hablo de usted, más que nada, de muy mayor o a personas de autoridad: mi jefe, mi maestro, mi maestra, mi maestre. (Brisa)*

Translation:

I only speak to a few people using *usted* mostly with elderly people or people with more authority: my boss, or my teachers. (Brisa)

Such attitudes lead older adults to lament the lack of politeness norms by younger generations when, in fact, they make calculated decisions as to whom they decide to use formal terms of address. However, this does not mean that participants rejected the use of *usted* forms outright. They sometimes resisted imposition of the *tú* form as argued by Agata:

*... si tú personalmente no te sientes a gusto a pesar de que te lo dicen, creo que es como buscar un intermedio: si la otra persona sigue sin tener problema que le hables de usted ... yo lo voy a seguir haciendo. (Agata)*

Translation:

... if you personally don't feel comfortable even though others tell you,

I believe you should be able to find a middle ground: If the other person still has no problem if you refer to them with *usted* ... I will keep on saying it. (Agata)

At the same time, participants argued that their politeness behaviour did not necessarily depend on the behaviour of others:

*Pues no vas a dejar de ser cortés sólo porque la otra persona no está actuando de la misma manera, sino que tú sigues pues... comportándote así. Y la otra persona sabrá. (Hilda)*

Translation:

Well, you are not going to stop being polite just because the other person does not behave in the same way, so you keep on... behaving that way. And so the other people will know what and how to behave. (Hilda)

This may mean directly confronting others:

*Es que no sé, depende mucho de la mentalidad de generaciones. Cuando los señores te dicen “igualada” por no hablarles de usted, es por que se sienten amenazados. (Brisa)*

Translation:

I don't know, it depends a lot on generational mentality. When elderly people call you *igualada*\* just because you didn't refer to them with *usted*, it is because they feel threatened. (Brisa)

\*meaning that you are doing/saying something you should not do/say to someone older than you.

This attitude suggests that participants will often develop their own sense of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Opposition and resistance involve taking one's decisions on how to interact with other people:

*Yo diría que no tomarte en cuenta como persona y que eres un mueble más y no le interesa si estás hablando o si te molesta algo. Si no te preocupa esa persona para nada, para ti es un mueble más y así la tratas. En vez de tenerle cuidado al tratarlo, lo tratas como te da la gana; como quieras tú y no te importa. (Romelia)*

Translation:

I would say that not being taken into account as a person and that you are just an object or a nuisance and not caring whether you are also participating in the conversation or if something bothers you. If you don't care about that person at all, that means it's just meaningless for you and you treat them disrespectfully. Instead of being cautious when you interact with them, you treat them as you wish; the way you want, and you don't care about them. (Romelia)

It has been seen that participants tend to make their own choices about deciding whether they want to show courtesy or avoid some behaviour usually considered as polite. However, sometimes past

experiences seem to have influenced the participants' decisions on certain polite practices:

*...si veo a alguien que se me queda viendo, pues me le quedo viendo también para no darle el asiento... Es que no quiero sonar grosero, pero pues es que la gente fue grosera conmigo y pues se aprovecharon de mi amabilidad. (Aleido)*

Translation:

...If I see someone staring at me, I do it too just to not give away my seat... It's just that I don't want to sound rude, but people have been mean to me and took advantage of my kindness. (Aleido)

In the final analysis, contested politeness behaviour may involve breaking the rules:

*Yo me le meto a la gente, yo meto codazos. La situación no está para hablarle a la gente. Aparte, estoy chiquita. (Brisa)*

Translation:

I push people, I put my elbows out. Nowadays, there is no room for talking to people. Also, I am very small. (Brisa)

The comments and observations reveal an underlying resentment which points to opposition.

Discussion

Participants' reflections regarding social politeness acknowledge the role

that the family plays in establishing and enacting politeness norms. There is also the tacit recognition of the regulatory behaviour and the need to maintain one's social position especially in terms of how to interact in *ciertos espacios sociales* (certain social spaces). Interactants acknowledged that the family was a major influence on demonstrating *buenos modales* (good manners), *educación* (upbringing) and *urbanidad* (civility). Prosocial politeness provides a blueprint to engaging in proper and acceptable behaviour. Whilst providing a degree of predictability and assurance, prosocial politeness can also be seen as a restraint on developing individual interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal politeness practices reflect an attempt to control and shape politeness resources as interactants decide when, with whom and how to engage in polite behaviour. Politeness is not automatically granted and adhered to but is often seen as reciprocal in recognition of the behaviour of others. Interpersonal politeness embraces the challenge of taking ownership of politeness assets as interactants co-construct and structure their relationships. At the same time, interpersonal politeness is heavily influenced by prosocial patterns and practices which govern the feasibility of communicative choices and possibilities whilst delineating interactional limitations and restrictions.

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Contested politeness indicates that participants are not willing to adhere to existing convention and practice indiscriminately and unquestioningly. On an individual level, participants argue that politeness practices should be justified and considered in terms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Such decisions will be based on personal experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs as to what constitutes appropriate behaviour. This means that politeness cannot be imposed or demanded by others but rather practices need to be assessed and evaluated as to their applicability, relevance and usefulness when engaging in prosocial and interpersonal relationships.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that linguistic politeness cannot be seen as an abstract concept consisting of norms, rules and conventions that interactants unwittingly follow and adhere to. By looking at the Mexican context, we maintain that politeness patterns and practices reflect both social and individual choices regarding how participants want to relate to others. Politeness can be used to direct, influence and effect the actions of other interactants when trying to achieve societal, group and personal goals. Politeness can no longer be seen as conventional, ordinary and predictable but rather as responsive, vibrant and combative depending on the individual social context.

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