Conventionalization, expectation, politeness and pragmatic impact: A German perspective

Stefanie Stadler (Kyoto)

Abstract

While politeness has originally been closely associated with indirectness in early politeness research, the field has since moved to a view that conventionalized indirectness tends to be the preferred option by interlocutors. The approach to conventionalization posits that conventionally indirect forms are considered to be the most polite. However, equating indirectness to politeness has been shown to be problematic. While indirectness may well remain an important construct within some cultural contexts, this certainly does not hold across all cultures and lingua-practices. This paper discusses the relevance of the concepts of conventionalization vs. expectation as a research construct and explores the link between communicative conventions, expectation, politeness and pragmatic impact within a German cultural framework. The data indicates that while many Anglo-Saxon cultures express face concerns and relational work through overt politeness markers and avoid direct communication, German culture does not show a dispreference for directness. The insights from this paper further reinforce this well-documented tendency. Furthermore, the findings suggest that relational work is actually achieved via the use of explicit, direct communication and modal particles that express contradiction. The evidence suggests that greater confrontational responses to the previous speaker can equal greater support of the conversational partner.

1 Introduction

An innate link between indirectness and politeness has been central to early politeness research. At first, researchers largely purported the view that indirectness constitutes politeness. Politeness has been framed by early research to be, for the most part, inversely correlated with directness and brevity, as can be seen in House/Kasper's (1981: 159–167, as summarized by Decock/Depraetere 2018: 35) illustration of politeness in complaint strategies:

#	Strategy	Example
1	X asserts explicitly that Y is bad	*You are really mean*
2	X asserts explicitly that Y's doing of P is bad	*I think it's mean that you just take my things*
3	By explicitly asserting that the action P for which Y is agentively responsible is bad, or explicitly stating a preference for an alternative action not chosen by Y, X implies that Y is bad/or X asserts explicitly that Y did P and that P is bad for X, thus also implying that Y is bad	*You shouldn't have taken my blouse without asking my permission* *You have ruined my blouse*
4	X explicitly asserts that Y did P	*You've stained my blouse*
5	By explicitly asking Y about the conditions for the execution of P or stating that Y was in some way connected with the conditions for the doing of P, X implies that Y did P	*Did you wear my blouse by any chance*?
6	By explicitly asserting that P is bad for him, X implies that Y did P	*Terrible, this stain won't ever come off*
7	By explicitly asserting that P, X implies that Y did P	*There's a stain on my blouse*
8	By performing the utterance U in the presence of Y, X implies that he knows that P has happened and he implies that Y did P	*Odd, my blouse was perfectly clean last night*

Table 1: Politeness and indirectness in complaints

However, Blum-Kulka (1987) introduced the possibility that politeness has more to do with conventionalization than with indirectness quite some time ago. While indirectness might not be the main driving force in determining the degree of politeness in an utterance, conventionalization is nevertheless typically equated to conventionalized forms of indirectness in the politeness literature, and therefore has always been tied to the concept of indirectness in one way or another.

More recently, however, Kádár/House (2021) posit that trying to draw a direct link between form and politeness is inherently problematic.

In this paper, I will therefore explore the concepts of expectation and conventionalization and how they relate to politeness. My focus will be on how culture shapes expectations, how expectations become converted to conventionalization, and how conventionalization impacts our understanding of politeness.

2 Literature review

Much of contextually appropriate politeness is extremely repetitive and formulaic in nature (cf. Watts 2003). This is true for the vast majority of speech acts, such as greetings (cf. Duranti 1997), refusals (cf. Felix-Brasdefer 2006) or compliments (cf. Wolfson 1981), which follow scripted routines and are hardly innovative or inventive. Although the extent to which these routines are formulaic are also culturally conditioned, there is no denying that each culture draws on pre-scripted and pre-scribed exchanges. Such conventionalizations can be regarded as devices to lighten our cognitive load and increase our functioning in society (cf. Teng 2006; Sterelny 2003). Much like cultural taxonomies, which provide a framework for inductive

inferences (cf. Franks 2011), conventionalized structures spare us from having to make complex decisions, such as inventing each time we meet a person from scratch how to greet them. Routines and conventions, then, are very helpful devices to make daily social interactions flow more easily and more smoothly (cf. Duranti 1997).

However, conventionalized routines are not necessarily always geared towards politeness. With a wide variability of cultural values, the importance a culture places on politeness also varies. While some societies place a prime value on politeness, e. g. Japanese society. According to Gerhold (2013), a survey on how foreigners perceived Japanese people revealed that 'polite' was the number one word associated with this culture (also cf. Holmes 1995; Wetzel 1988). The same can be said for New Zealand society (which is mostly described as 'polite, gracious and friendly to everyone' by Education New Zealand and other similar sites). Even though Japanese and New Zealand societies are polite in very different ways and for different reasons, in particular with relation to hierarchical and egalitarian orientations, formality and informality, it does not change the fact that politeness is highly valued and that there is a propensity for indirectness, mitigation and conflict avoidance.

In contrast, German society, for example, emphasizes honesty as a value (cf. Stadler 2007), which sometimes means Germans can be found to be very blunt in giving their opinions, because white lies for politeness' sake are not as highly regarded as honesty, and because politeness in general is not as highly ranked as a value as it is in other societies. Or as Zeidenitz/ Barkow (2005: 10f.) put it in a humorous quip: "[The Germans] like to be respected for their devotion to truth and honesty. They are surprised that this is sometimes taken as tactlessness, or worse. Surely the truth is more important than pretending to like your ghastly shirt [...]? Foreigners just cannot seem to appreciate this". And since Goffman (1971) observed that indirectness is linked to disguising an utterance, i. e. an omission of honesty, it becomes clear why Germans might forfeit politeness for the sake of honesty and clarity.

The concept that directness and even impoliteness can be the preferred linguistic choice is not entirely novel. However, it is one that I would like to pick up here. House (2010: 561), for example, postulates that Germans favour "expressions that are more direct than indirect, more explicit than implicit, and generally more content-oriented than addressee-oriented". This is not to say Germans are rude people. This is purely based on communicative style preferences (cf. House 2006). In other words, German conventions are geared towards clear and straightforward communication, where politeness only plays a secondary, or even quite marginal, role. In his findings, Philburn (2011) further emphasizes that German communication style is more geared towards opinionated and even combative talk. According to Kakava (2002), Schiffrin (1984), Boxer/Pickering (1995) and Lee/Peck (1995), in some cultures, under certain circumstances, disagreements can even have a sociable nature. These cultures typically have a high involvement style (cf. Kotthoff 1991; Kakava 1994; Edstrom 2004; Fant 1992), where it is more face-threatening not to be able to defend one's own position than to do so (cf. Kotthoff 1991; Philburn 2011). This, of course, is not limited to German society. Further European cultures that adhere to these preferences include Austrian culture (cf. Gruber 1993), Danish culture (cf. Steffensen/Dinesen 2020), Dutch culture (cf. Lau 2019), Greek culture (cf. Kakava 2002), Polish culture (cf. Ronowicz 1995; Ogiermann 2009), Russian culture (cf. Ogiermann 2009), and Spanish culture (cf. Fant 1992).

Beyond cultural preferences, however, there are also circumstantial exceptions, regarding politeness, in otherwise very polite societies. Culpeper (2005), in his work on impoliteness, has argued previously that some settings do not only allow for impoliteness, but practically call for it. The British day-time television quiz show *The Weakest Link*, which he cites as example, is one such context in which impoliteness is not only desirable, but is the calling card of show host Anne Robinson, and, indeed, the very reason for the show's existence and popularity. Stadler (2007) has also argued that certain genres, such as televised political panel discussions demand impoliteness for entertainment values' sake, since the very point of an engaging, lively discussion is that of argumentation. A panel discussion without opposing views would make for very boring viewing.

Certain contexts, situations and circumstances, in other words, do not only allow for impoliteness, but invite, nurture and foster impoliteness. While this is highly context and genre dependent, it is not entirely limited to the entertainment sector. I would argue that certain circumstances and situations in daily interactions also permit and justify impoliteness. More importantly though, I would argue that conventionalization allows us a certain degree of impoliteness. A lack of overtly polite forms can therefore be considered more polite than their inclusion.

The dissociation of traditional conceptualizations of politeness with regard to indirectness and overt expressions of politeness through politeness markers and politeness formulae has been advocated by Terkourafi (2015), who argues in favour of regarding politeness as a reflection of conventionalizations. Largely, she argues, because cultural (and class-related) conventions shape our expectations. Terkourafi (2002), in fact, considers the regularity with which we are exposed to polite conventions to be a major factor in shaping our perceptions of what is appropriate to use in which context. She argues that this socialization into what constitutes politeness within our social networks is so prominent that we resist the possibility that conventional indirectness could ever be impolite (cf. Terkourafi 2015: 15). She therefore regards conventionalization as central to politeness. Terkourafi (ibid.), considers conventionalization to be "inherently evaluative" (ibd.: 16) and subjective, seeing as she claims it to be a "matter of one's experiences" (ibd.: 15), which can vary even within the same speaker over time.

Perhaps an even more useful construct than conventionalization then is that of expectations, because the notion of expectations invariably encompasses the notion of both cultural and individual preferences, especially if we adopt Terkourafi's (ibid.) viewpoint that expectations can change within the same speaker over time. In addition, expectations are far more subject to change over time compared with conventions, which carry a notion of long-standing tradition. Perhaps, politeness ought to be regarded as a mixture of both then, traditional cultural conventions and individual, adaptable expectations.

Aambø (2014, cited in Keilhau 2013) in fact defines politeness practically solely with regards to expectations, stating that "Hver kultur har den høfligheten den trenger. Det er når vi får en blanding av kulturer at vi kan tolke vherandre som uhøflige fordi vi har ulike forventninger til høflighetskodene". ('Every culture has the courtesy it needs. It is when we get a mix of cultures that we can interpret each other as rude, because we have different expectations of politeness etiquette'). What this implies then is that politeness cannot be defined objectively, because it is not about right or wrong, but purely about expectations, as Aambø (2014) establishes. This is a

point that has also been emphasized by Sifianou (1999: 2), who claims that "no nation may be objectively verified as more or less polite than any other, but only polite in a different, culturally specific way".

The notion of expectations as a relevant concept for politeness research has also been raised by Haugh (2002), who positions politeness vis-à-vis what a speaker thinks of the hearer, relative to their expectations. Haugh (2003) speaks of adhering to the level of politeness that is anticipated by the interlocutors, which clearly mirrors Terkourafi's (2015) and Aambø's (2014) notions of cultural conventions and the expectations that we form based on having been socialized into these conventionalized politeness norms.

For this very reason, this paper shall refrain from providing a working definition of politeness, as is commonly done, and instead discuss the expectations regarding politeness that emerge from the data itself in a German cultural context. Haugh (2007) has called into question the utility of the notion of politeness itself, as has Meier (2004). In the view of this shift away from politeness as a useful construct for observation, I will instead rely on how interactants respond and relate to a consistent lack of overt politeness. For the same reason, I will refrain from referring to a lack of overt politeness as impoliteness, as non-existent politeness does not automatically equate to impoliteness either. Instead, I will refer to a lack of overt politeness and the expression of covert forms of interactions that may be regarded as polite, albeit in rather different ways. The reason why I refrain from using Locher/Watts' (2005: 12) term "non-polite" is because it constitutes an emic construct of unmarked behavior, that can only be judged as truly unmarked and unproblematic by the speakers themselves. Though speakers sometimes comment on this (and in some cases I do have this prove that the speakers themselves saw their interactional partners' communicative behavior as unproblematic), I cannot in all instances ascertain that said behavior was indeed unmarked.

A number of researchers have, in fact, raised concerns about the conceptualization of politeness as a research construct (2nd order politeness) and advocate for emic evaluations of politeness as perceived by the interactants themselves (1st order politeness) (cf. Haugh 2007; Locher/Watts 2005; Eelen 2001). However, relying on 1st order politeness alone is virtually impossible, for the aforementioned reasons, while relying on 2nd order politeness invariably provides a distorted and subjective picture. In this paper, I attempt to rely on 1st order politeness assessments as much as possible and will resort to 2nd order politeness only where such self-evaluations (or at least conversational indications) are lacking, or to shed light on the likely reasons underlying the interlocutors' reactions and responses.

What I set out to explore in this paper then is a (mostly) 1st order assessment of conventionalizations and expectations surrounding politeness in a German cultural context.

3 Methodology

An empirical, observational qualitative approach was applied to explore the link between conventionalization, expectation and politeness. The primary source of data consisted of several hours of video recordings of informal interactional data, as well as a collection of examples based on observations from daily-life situations across a variety of contexts and genres. The data stems both from a German context as well as from German speakers observed abroad.

The examples stem from the following contexts:

a) Informal face-to-face encounters between strangers (i. e. interactions overheard in public settings)
b) Informal face-to-face encounters between family and friends (i. e. interactions recorded in private settings)
c) Text message interactions between friends (i. e. as part of a WhatsApp chat group)

Speakers ranged in age from early 20s to late 70s, from working class to middle class, and were mostly from the Bavarian-speaking regions of Lower and Upper Bavaria. Coincidentally, this is also true for the speakers observed abroad.

The data was subjected to a bottom-up discourse analysis approach. Since discourse analysis allows us to explore not only speech production, but also how messages are perceived, received and responded to by interlocutors, this type of approach represents the ideal methodological approach to gather the 1st order politeness insights this study was aiming to obtain. In order to understand the workings of conventionalization and expectation in politeness, it is essential to identify if and how interactants themselves are affected by politeness (or a lack thereof) during the interaction. If we adopt the view that conventionalization allows for a lack of overt politeness in certain cultures, where overt politeness is less important than other forms of relational work, then the interactants' reactions are vital indicators of whether a lack of politeness is indeed acceptable and appropriate in a society.

4 Data analysis

4.1 Expectation and pragmatic equivalence

German culture is not exactly known for its display of overt politeness; quite the opposite in fact. German conversational style is marked by curtness and direct communication, to the point of bluntness. This not only applies to the German culture at large, but also to the Bavarian-speaking southern region of Germany. This tendency toward curtness became evident during a flight experience, in which the direct and somewhat aggressive sounding imperative that resulted from a passenger getting up during the final stages of the landing approach in very rough weather conditions, highlighted that politeness is not necessarily called for at all times.

Example: In-flight announcement

Onboard a Lufthansa flight from Barcelona to Munich, during the final stages of the landing approach in very rough weather conditions, a thunderstorm to be precise, one of the passengers suddenly got up from her seat to get something from the overhead compartment. As a response to this move, one of the flight attendants shot up from her seat and immediately announced through the intercom in an urgent, tense, and agitated tone of voice and raised volume: "Setzten Sie sich wieder hin!" ('Sit down again!'), which was practically barked through the intercom system. While I was taken aback by the harsh tone of the command, I was even more taken aback by the subsequent much friendlier sounding announcement from the same flight attendant asking the passenger to "Please sit down". My immediate reaction to these two very different utterances was that they were hardly equivalent. However, the more I thought about the

equivalence between German command and English request, the more it became apparent that they are not too dissimilar in nature after all.

One aspect to consider in the flight attendants' reaction is that a certain brevity and harshness is justified, given the situational circumstances. While flights are clearly not a genre that invite routinized impoliteness, the urgency of the stages of landing, combined with the rather severe weather conditions, create a situational context that allows for a lack of politeness. Safety protocols are introduced for a reason (one wants to hope at least) and it is the flight attendant's duty to ensure these are being followed. Her priority in the aforementioned situation was thus not politeness, but quickness and effectiveness of her request/reprimand.

It can also be argued that the direct and urgent reaction was a demonstration of concern for the passenger's safety and that this concern was more prevalent than considerations of politeness, face and maintaining etiquette. The very fact that flight attendants are typically trained to be very polite, considerate and respectful suggests that something far more important is at stake for her to have broken this protocol.

However, it can also be argued that the two different language versions are pragmatically equivalent in several ways. Said flight experience suggests that conventionalization equals politeness based on the notion that different cultures have different preferences for expressing and verbalizing politeness. Just because something is different, does not automatically make it less polite. In this sense, a direct and explicit imperative in German may well be pragmatically equivalent to a politely phrased request in English.

Firstly, English politeness norms are simply very different from German politeness norms, irrespective of the culture of origin of where the particular variety of English is spoken. In complimenting behaviour, for example, an orientation towards positive politeness and maximizing strategies (cf. Kasper 1990) has been found for US English (cf. Manes 1983; Wolfson 1983), New Zealand English (cf. Holmes 1986, 1988), South African English (cf. Herbert 1989; Herbert/ Straight 1989), and Hawai'i Creole English (cf. Lee 1990). The different varieties of English have all been associated with indirectness, preference for politeness, and disagreement avoidance. Seeing as German style has been identified as more direct and explicit (cf. e. g. House 2010), it can be argued that this preferred style also to some extent meets politeness expectations, while it may be considered to be impolite in English (cf. Stadler 2007). Ogierman (2009), for example has argued that imperatives can be interpreted as polite requests in Polish and Russian, as has Wierzbicka (1991). As such, maybe direct German statements can then be argued to be the pragmatic equivalent of English politeness.

Secondly, the English word *please* can carry a wide variety of meanings and connotations. In English, it is not infrequently employed to express urgency and annoyance. An emphatic *please*, as was used by the stewardess, can therefore be argued to express impoliteness rather than politeness. As Wichmann (2005) has argued, *please* can turn from a lexical marker for courtesy to one of appeal based on prosody. The German lexical item *bitte*, on the other hand, carries slightly different connotations. While it can certainly be employed in the same way as the English *please*, it is very rarely used in this way. *Bitte* is normally used in the sense of *please* as politeness token, in the sense of *here you are*, as a sarcastic device, such as in *wie bitte?*, and in a pleading manner, in which case it tends to be repeated several times. However, the appeal

type of *please* seen in this announcement is rather uncommon in German language use. For this reason, the insertion of *bitte* into the German sentence would likely have given a very different pragmatic outcome to this utterance.

It can further be argued that, where *please* is missing in the German version, the use of the formal address form *Sie* is adding a politeness element, or at the very least an element of respect, to the German phrase that is missing from the English version. Schlund (2014) speaks of the use of the v-form as a politeness system of more distance. Since German is a language that uses the t/v distinction, which English lacks, choosing the polite v-form, lends an element of formality and respect to the imperative that, in some ways, allows for the rest of the message to be more direct, without coming across as rude and disrespectful. Ogierman (2009) speaks of the inclusion of address terms as a form of softening device and therefore mitigation. In fact, I would argue that the omission of the v-form, but inclusion of politeness particle, as in: "Bitte setz Dich hin", i. e. the exact translation of the English version, to address someone who is clearly an adult, would be far more rude than the imperative version without the politeness particle *bitte*, but with the use of the v-form.

Thus, while the politeness forms employed by the flight attendant differ, it can be said that both versions contain elements of conventionalized politeness. While maybe not entirely equivalent, when considered with relation to the cultural contexts and respective politeness expectations, they can be said to be relatively similar in terms of pragmatic impact.

4.2 Cultural value systems: Honesty vs. politeness

Such lack of overt politeness is, however, not limited to such formal public settings and such extreme situations where personal safety and airline protocol are at stake. This is equally pervasive in informal exchanges between family and friends.

Example: Festive overindulgence

Two close friends exchanged a series of WhatsApp messages around Christmas time, which, in German culture, is a time of food excesses and overeating. As a consequence, one friend posted a picture with the words "An dieser Stelle möchte ich dem Erfinder der stretch jeans danken". ('At this point I would like to thank the inventor of the stretch jeans'). As a response, my other friend replied with "leggings" and then posted a picture of herself wearing leggings, to which the first friend responded with "I find leggings ganz furchtbar". ('I find leggings totally awful').

Considering that the one friend made a suggestion of wearing leggings and can clearly be seen wearing them herself, it seems like a very harsh and possibly unnecessarily face-threatening thing to say that one finds leggings not just awful, but totally awful. It comes across as almost insulting to tell a friend who is fond of them that one finds them awful. However, no offense is taken, as the freedom to voice one's opinion and give honest feedback override politeness considerations in importance here.

A similar scenario occurred between the same friends, in a face-to-face setting, a few years earlier. Said scenario evolved around a scarf one friend received for Christmas and was clearly very fond of. While meeting in a café, a stranger commented positively on the scarf, which resulted in an even more blunt statement, with the other friend commenting that she found the

scarf ugly and unattractive (despite the fact that she was never even prompted to give her opinion on the scarf). According to Wierzbicka (1985: 160), this is fairly similar to Polish culture where "opinions are typically expressed fairly forcefully".

What is noteworthy, however, is that these instances did not even register as problematic or even memorable with said friends, because neither of them could remember the incidents when asked them about it afterwards, nor did they give any indication at the time of occurrence that they were insulted, taken aback or even remotely negatively affected by the comments. Since the incidents did not register as problematic with the interactants involved, the only valid conclusion is that their expectations of polite and situationally appropriate conduct were not violated, i. e. the speech behaviour met expectations. I do not want to go so far as to say that this conduct is considered polite, but because it is conventionalized in a southern German communicative context, it is entirely unproblematic to the interactants themselves.

To some extent, it can be argued that such incidents are also a way of showing concern for the interlocutor. In German culture, it is regarded as a close friend's duty to advise friends honestly and prevent them from making poor choices, even if this can be face-threatening. This goes so far that another friend seriously contemplated – for a considerable amount of time – to tell a complete stranger, in a shop in Bali, that neither the colour nor the cut of the dress she was considering buying did her any favours. Zeidenitz and Barkow's (2005) comment that honesty and preventing people from making mistakes is prioritized in German culture, where honesty appears to hold a higher value than politeness, even in situations concerning strangers, as the example from Bali clearly indicates.

4.3 Directness and dismissal as relational strategy

However, these instances of directness are by no means isolated cases. Multiple scenarios of this nature also appeared in my video-recorded interactional data. A few of these are outlined below, which also demonstrate that blunt dismissal of others' statements and opinions are standard conversational practices, at least in a southern German conversational context.

Example: Disadvantaged

Resal:	*Sie*	*is*	*scho*	*a*	*weng*	*im*	*Nachteil*	*oba*	*naja*	–
	She	is	already	a	bit	in	disadvantage	but	well	
	'She is a little disadvantaged after all, but oh well –'									
Bruni:	*ja*		*pf*	*wo*	*hod*	*sie*	*an*	*Nachteil*		
	modal particle		negation	where	has	she	a	disadvantage		
	'Nonsense, how is she disadvantaged.'									
Lexi:	*ah geh::*		*(.)*	*etz*	*wega*	*wos*				
	interjection		pause	now	because of	what				
	'Oh come on now, in what way.'									
Michi:	*Sie*	*is*	*groass,*	*sie*	*is*	*schlank,*	*sie*	*hod*	*vui*	*Busen*
	She	is	tall	she	is	slender	she	has	a lot of	boobs
	'She is tall, she is slender, she has big boobs'									

Michi:	*wos*	*im*	*Verhältnis*	*dann*	*wieda*	*schee*	*is*
	what	in	relation	then	again	beautiful	is

'which is beautiful in relation to the rest.'

This example is interesting in the sense that the contradictions by Bruni, Lexi and Michi are both combative and supportive at the same time. After Resal voices her concerns regarding her granddaughter being disadvantaged in terms of looks, Bruni and Lexi immediately reject her statement. Both of these rejections are said in a confrontational and dismissive manner. However, these rejections follow a put-down, which could be argued to constitute an incident of self-deprecation, since Resal strongly associates with her granddaughter and feels somewhat responsible for her. Rejections after self-deprecation can be argued to carry supportive elements, seeing as they are used to affirm Resal that she has nothing to worry about with regard to her granddaughter.

Even though the tone of voice is challenging, the content is reassuring the interactant. Michi then adds to this by listing some of the granddaughter's favourable characteristics, which further serves to reassure Resal. However, this passage is also said in a challenging and somewhat exasperated manner, basically telling Resal that she is blowing things out of proportion. In a way then, one can argue that the stronger and more forceful the opposing statements are, the more support and concern they show, even though the tone of voice might be dismissive and combative, to the point of aggressive. This exchange therefore constitutes a peculiar mixture between supportive and critical/dismissive. The exchange lacks entirely in overt politeness, but carries covert politeness elements instead. By trying to help Resal see things in a more positive light, politeness is expressed through interpersonal concern. While it is not a novel insight that disagreements are the preferred next move after self-deprecation (cf. Pomerantz 1984), in southern German culture, self-deprecation is not the only context in which disagreements carry a supportive and relationship-oriented pragmatic function.

In another conversation, one of the speakers is practically telling his interactional partner off while showing concern for her at the same time:

Example: Fried cheese

Michi:	*Ah-*	*do*	*muass*	*i*	*iatz*	*amoi*	*ausse*	*schaun*	*wias*	*des*	*mocht*
	Uh-	there	have to	I	now	one time	outside	look	how she	that	does

'Uh- I have to have a look just now how she's doing this,'

Michi:	*wei*	*wenns*	*ma*	*schmeckt*	*dann*	*muass*	*i*	*des*	*wissn*
	because	if	to me	tastes nice	then	have to	I	that	know

'because if I like it then I have to know'

Michi:	*wenns*	*ma*	*ned*	*schmeckt*	*dann*	*is*	*wurscht*
	if	to me	not	tastes nice	then	is	unimportant

'if I don't like it, it doesn't matter.'

Fritz:	*ja*	*iss*	*hoid*	*zerscht*	*amoi*
	modal particle	eat	modal particle	first	one time

'Just try it first.'

Michi:	*Naa::*	*weil*	*dawei*	*is*	*zspät* –
	Noo::	because	by then	is	too late
	'No, because by then it's too late–'				

Michi is given a plate with a hot fried cheese snack fresh from the pan, then she picks up her cutlery, puts it down again without tasting the snack and gets up to take a look in the kitchen. Fritz tells her off quite bluntly as a reaction to her getting up. With the shortened *ja* functioning as a discourse particle of contradiction and *zerscht* meaning both beforehand and also carrying a challenging element in the sense of *just do it already*, he contradicts her actions quite forcefully. This is further aggravated by his tone of voice. An additional challenging element is inserted via the modal particle *hoid*, which expresses both contrast and the speaker's attitude (cf. Seemann/Scheffler 2025).

However, again, it can be argued that in the challenge and bluntness, Fritz is also showing some concern for Michi, partly because it was made clear in the preceding conversation that this snack has to be eaten while hot, and partly because Michi will be wasting her time and effort if she ends up not enjoying the food. As such, this excerpt again lacks any outward form of politeness, but shows concern for the speaker in other ways. Concern is therefore not expressed through the choice of words or speech prosody in these examples from Bavarian speakers' conversations, but rather through speaker intention. Haugh (2007) actually argued this very point as well by suggesting that politeness can be found (at least in part) in expressions of concern.

Despite the lack of politeness in these examples of southern German interactions and conversational scenarios, it becomes clear from the interlocutors' reactions themselves that politeness is not an expectation. Again, the exchanges register as unproblematic to the interactants involved, and since such conversations are in line with expected behavioural practices in the region, they can be said to conform to speech conventions.

The fact that Bavarian interactants show support and concern in entirely different ways may appear rude to the outside observer, but this does not take away from the fact that to the interlocutors themselves, i. e. from an emic perspective, there is no lack in interpersonal warmth or consideration. Lau (2019) observed the same phenomenon in Dutch speakers, who also show concern for others in ways that may be interpreted as rude by members of other linguacultures, but are based on positive intentions. It is merely carried out through different conventions that do not conform to the politeness expectations of some cultures.

The fact that a direct stance and frank communication are preferred, is in fact highlighted by a comment I overheard. This comment was made by a Bavarian member of a group of young people travelling together during a day-trip in Yogyakarta in Indonesia. They were engaged in a rather lively and somewhat heated debate, when one of the travelers suggested to reign in the discussion a little, to which one girl responded with: "Entweda mia diskutiern hier oda mia lass mas bleim". ('Either we are having a discussion here or we leave it be altogether'). Her stance is indicative of a German fondness for discussions. This includes engaging with topics on a profound level, with a degree of passion for the topic, as well as an ability to voice one's opinions freely. A preference that has also been documented by House (2010).

While none of these examples meet conventional politeness or potentially even normative politeness within a larger German cultural framework, it does meet the expectations and prefer-

ences of communicative conduct of the interlocutors. This further underlines that politeness, at least in southern German culture, is a construct that is secondary to other relational considerations, such as honestly, showing concern, and providing emotional support.

5 Discussion

What I hope to have shown with this exploration of politeness in southern German culture is a) that various cultures do in fact demonstrate a preference for directness and for a lack of overt politeness, b) that this preference can be driven by very different cultural values and social motivations, and c) that in southern German culture, concern for other people is shown in different ways that do not conform to traditional expectations of polite and indirect conversational practices (including conventionalized indirectness).

Politeness, I would argue then, not only in German culture but in general, is largely defined through expectations. And the expectation in German culture is an honest, straightforward and direct way of communication. An adherence to these expectations cannot be regarded as lacking in politeness, but rather as the foregrounding of similar conversational goals via different communicative strategies.

Politeness in the literature is often discussed in a manner that gives the impression that politeness is the desired communicative style and is presented as somewhat of a norm. Other styles that deviate from it often come across as less attractive or desirable, somehow falling short of the standard. This may well be due to the fact that much of the research that is carried out in the linguistic community is Anglo-centric, and much of the comparative research stems from Asian cultures, which also show a strong orientation to overt politeness, such as the Japanese culture. Or maybe it is merely that coming from a very direct culture, I often feel the need to justify why my own culture does not value overt politeness to the same extent. However, there is still a strong tendency to equate a lack of politeness with impoliteness and that such communicative behaviour invariably carries negative connotations.

This paper, however, shows that politeness is not a requirement and indeed neither a preference nor an expectation in certain situations, circumstances and indeed cultures. It also emphasizes that a lack of overt politeness is in no way disliked or negatively evaluated by the interlocutors themselves. In the case of German culture, this may well be linked to the fact that indirectness is more difficult to classify (cf. Miehle/Minker/Ultes 2022) than direct communication, and as a low-context culture, German culture simply prefers clarity and efficiency over elaborateness and indirectness (cf. Würtz 2006).

In this paper, I hope to have demonstrated that politeness does not necessarily need to follow Anglo-centric norms of politeness makers and politeness principles. Instead, a lack of traditional politeness can be situationally, circumstantially and contextually warranted. Instead of viewing politeness as a categorical, transferrable construct with relatively universal principles, politeness, here, is examined as a cultural (or even regional) product that is intrinsically interlinked with the cultural value systems and socio-pragmatic expectations of the cultural setting in which it can be observed.

The presence or absence of politeness markers, in some ways, distracts from the fact that politeness can be found in many – far less tangible – communication strategies. For example, the

fact that, in German culture, directness and honesty can be valued more highly than overt politeness and that a blunt opinion is in and of itself more polite than a white lie (cf. Stadler 2007). Or, for example, that solidarity and relationship maintenance in German culture is more expressed through concern for the other person rather than through overt verbal politeness markers. This was also observed by Rash (2004), whose research highlights that, in German culture, greeting rituals, such as greeting strangers on a walk in rural settings, is at the heart of politeness, consideration and good manners. While she discusses Swiss German culture, this is no different in rural areas in southern German culture. Whereas the otherwise so polite Japanese people, whose language and lingua-culture practices abound in honorifics and other-oriented behaviours, will not usually acknowledge strangers, seeing as politeness in their culture is very much rooted in minding one's own business and not impeding on others. She also mentions the infamous notion that while American English speakers, when they inquire "how are you?" are not usually interested in an actual answer, in German culture people are, echoing my argument that sincerity is at the core of German perceptions of what constitutes politeness. Another such example is the fact that in Finnish culture, silence is in some cases the most polite way to respond and signals respect in ways that speech could not convey (cf. Carbaugh/Berry/Nurmikari-Berry 2006; Koivusalo 1999; Petkova 2015).

To come back to Aambø's (2014) observation then, each culture has the level of politeness it needs, and this can and does look very different across cultural contexts.

6 Conclusion

Expectation and conventionalization constitute the very reflection of this intersection between cultural values and politeness. While expected communicative behaviour may not always seem polite from an etic perspective, they tend to carry 1st order politeness to the insider who is privy to the intricate workings that underlie communicative style preferences. I have therefore argued in this paper that expectation constitutes a form of politeness, no matter how hidden this might be at a first glance to the outside observer.

It is no secret that similar conversational strategies can serve rather different purposes across cultures. This paper demonstrated that directness and challenges to a previous speaker's utterances can serve a supportive function directed at relational work within a southern German cultural framework.

References

Aambø, Reidun (2014): *Typisk norsk å være uhøflig?* Oslo: Volda University College. https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/281410/Aamb%F8_spansk_2014.pdf?sequence=1 [24.10.2017].

Blum-Kulka, Shoshana (1987): "Indirectness and politeness: Same or different?" *Journal of Pragmatics* 11/2: 131–146.

Boxer, Diana/Pickering, Lucy (1995): "Problems in the presentation of speech acts in ELT materials: The case of complaints". *ELT Journal* 49/1: 44–58.

Carbaugh, Donal/Berry, Michael/Nurmikari-Berry (2006): "Coding personhood through cultural terms and practices: Silence and quietude as a Finnish 'natural way of being'". *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 25/3: 1–18.

Culpeper, Jonathan (2005): "Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The Weakest Link". *Journal of Politeness Research* 1: 35–72.

Decock, Sofie/Depraetere, Ilse (2018): "(In)directness and complaints: A reassessment". *Journal of Pragmatics* 132: 33–46.

Duranti, Alessandro (1997): "Universal and culture-specific properties of greetings". *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 7/1: 63–97.

Edstrom, Anne (2004): "Expressions of disagreement by Venezuelans in conversation: Reconsidering the influence of culture". *Journal of Pragmatics* 36/8: 1499–1518.

Education New Zealand. education-newzealand.org [13.07.2016].

Eelen, Gino (2001): *A Critique of Politeness Theories*. Manchester: St. Jerome.

Fant, Lars (1992): 'Scandinavians and Spaniards in negotiation". In: Sjögren, Annick/Janson, Lena (eds.): *Culture and Management in the Field of Ethnology and Business Administration*. Stockholm. Stockholm, Stockholm School of Economics and The Swedish Immigration Institute and Museum: 125–153.

Felix-Brasdefer, J. César (2006): "Linguistic politeness in Mexico: Refusal strategies among male speakers of Mexican Spanish". *Journal of Pragmatics* 38: 2158–2187.

Franks, Bradley (2011): *Culture and Cognition*. London: Palgrave.

Gerhold, Paula (2013): "The top 10 words to describe Japanese people (according to foreigners)". *Japan Today,* August 28, 2013. https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/the-top-10-words-to-describe-japanese-people-according-to-foreigners [20.03.2025].

Goffman, Erving (1971): *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. London: Penguin.

Gruber, Helmut (1993): "Öffentlicher Dissens". *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* 47/4: 1–27.

Haugh, Michael (2002): "The intuitive basis of implicature: Relevance theoretic implicitness versus Gricean implying". *Pragmatics* 12: 117–134.

Haugh, Michael (2003): "Anticipated versus inferred politeness". *Multilingua* 22: 397–413.

Haugh, Michael (2007): "A discursive challenge to politeness research: An interactional alternative". *Journal of Politeness Research* 3: 295–317.

Herbert, Robert K. (1989): "The ethnography of English compliments and compliment responses: A contrastive sketch". In: Oleksy, Wieslaw (ed.): *Contrastive Pragmatics*. Amsterdam, Benjamins: 3–35.

Herbert, Robert K./Straight, Steven (1989): "Compliment-rejection versus compliment-avoidance: Listener-based versus speaker-based pragmatic strategies". *Language and Communication* 9: 35–47.

Holmes, Janet (1986): "Compliments and compliment responses in New Zealand English". *Anthropological Linguistics* 28: 485–508.

Holmes, Janet (1988): "Paying compliments: A sex-preferential positive politeness strategy". *Journal of Pragmatics* 12: 445–465.

Holmes, Janet (1995): *Women, men and politeness*. London: Longman.

House, Juliane/Kasper, Gabriele (1981): "Politeness markers in English and German". In: Coulmas, Florian (ed.): *Conversational Routine.* The Hague, Mouton: 157–185.

House, Juliane (2010): "Impoliteness in Germany: Intercultural encounters in everyday and institutional talk". *Intercultural Pragmatics* 7/4: 561–595.

House, Juliane (2006): "Communicative Styles in English and German". *European Journal of English Studies* 10: 249–267.

Kádár, Daniel Z./House, Juliane (2021): "Politeness markers revisited: A contrastive pragmatic perspective". *Journal of Politeness Research* 17/10: 79–109.

Kakava, Christina (1994): "'If it was your sister...': Personalisation in arguments". In: Philippaki-Warburton, Irene et al. (eds.): *Themes in Greek Linguistics*. Amsterdam, Benjamins: 261–268.

Kakava, Christina (2002): "Opposition in modern Greek discourse: Cultural and contextual constraints". *Journal of Pragmatics* 34/10–11: 1537–1568.

Kasper, Gabriele (1990): "Linguistic politeness: Current research issues". *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in ESL* 9/1: 1–33.

Keilhau, Lars (2013): "Vi er så høflige som vi trenger å være". *Aftenposten.* aftenposten.no/kultur/i/vmXJl/--Vi-er-sa-hoflige-som-vi-trenger-a- vare [24.10.2017].

Koivusalo, Markku (1999): "Still life –The aesthetics of Finnish silence". In: Tapininen Jaakko (ed.): *Finland: The northern experience, new Europe, and the next millennium*. Helsinki, Tammi: 4–53.

Kotthoff, Helga (1991): "Zugeständnisse und Dissens in deutschen, anglo- amerikanischen und in nativ-nichtnativen Gesprächen". *Linguistische Berichte* 135: 375–397.

Lau, Michelle (2019): *Dutch Directness and British Politeness*. Master Thesis, Uthrecht University, Uthrecht. https://studenttheses.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/20.500.12932/33881/MA%20thesis%20-%20M.Z.%20Lau.pdf?sequence=2 [10.03.2025].

Lee, Candis (1990): "'Cute yaw haiya' – 'Nah'. An exploratory study of Hawai'i Creole English compliments and their responses". *University of Hawai'i Working Papers in English as a Second Language* 9: 115–160.

Lee, David A./Peck, Jennifer J. (1995): "Troubled waters: Argument as Sociability Revisited". *Language in Society* 24/1: 29–52.

Locher, Miriam/Watts, Richard J. (2005): "Politeness theory and relational work". *Journal of Politeness Research* 1/1: 9–34.

Manes, Joan (1983): "Complimenting: A mirror of cultural values". In: Wolfson, Nessa/Judd, Elliot (eds.): *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA, Newbury House: 96–102.

Meier, Ardith J. (2004): "Has 'politeness' outlived its usefulness?". *Vienna English Working Papers* 13/1: 5–22.

Miehle, Juliana//Minker, Wolfgang/Ultes, Stefan (2022): "When to say what and how: Adapting the elaborateness and indirectness of spoken dialogue systems". *Dialogue and Discourse* 13/1: 1–40.

Ogierman, Eva (2009): "Politeness and in-directness across cultures: A comparison of English, German, Polish, and Russian requests". *Journal of Politeness Research* 5: 189–216.

Petkova, Diana P. (2015): "Beyond silence. A cross-cultural comparison between Finnish 'quietude' and Japanese 'tranquility'". *Eastern Academic Journal* 4: 1–14.

Philburn, Rob (2011): "Aspects of English and German sociable selfhood". In: Witte, Arnd/Harden, Theo (eds.): *Intercultural Competence: Concepts, Challenges, Evaluations*. Oxford, Lang: 411–435.

Pomerantz, Anita (1984): "Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes". In: Atkinson, Maxwell/Heritage, John (eds.): *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 57–101.

Rash, Felicity (2004): "Linguistic politeness and greeting rituals in German-speaking Switzerland". *Linguistik Online* 20/3/04: 47–72. doi.org/10.13092/lo.20.1063.

Ronowicz, Edmund A. (1995): "Aussies *are* friendly and Poles *aren't* rude: Some remarks on overcoming problems in intercultural communication". *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics* 30: 31–44.

Schiffrin, Deborah (1984): "Jewish argument as sociability". *Language in Society 13*/3: 311–335.

Schlund, Katrin (2014): "Aspects of linguistic politeness in Serbian: A data-based comparison with German". *Linguistik Online* 69/7: 69–89. doi.org/10.13092/lo.69.1657.

Seemann, Hannah J./Scheffler, Tatjana (2025). "German modal particles as discourse Signals". *Dialogue and Discourse* 16/1: 1–30.

Sifianou, Maria (1999): *Politeness phenomena in England and Greece*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Stadler, Stefanie (2007): *Multimodal (Im)politeness*. Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovac.

Steffensen, Johan Vork/Dinesen, Birthe (2020): "Traveling in Japan and Denmark: A guide to navigate in the two cultures". *Japanese-Danish TeleTech Network*. jdteletech.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/JD-TeleTech-CultureGuide.pdf [17.03.2025].

Sterelny, Kim (2003). "Cognitive load and human decision, or, three ways of rolling the rock up hill". In: Carruthers, Peter et al. (eds.): *Innate Mind: Culture and Cognition*. *Volume 2*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 218–236.

Teng, Yao Jun (2006): "The interpersonal and pragmatic functions of formulaic language and its productive strategy in intercultural communication". *Journal of Shandong Education Institute* 3.

Terkourafi, Marina (2002): "Politeness and formulaicity: Evidence from Cypriot Greek". *Journal of Greek Linguistics* 3: 179–201.

Terkourafi, Marina (2015): "Conventionalization: A new agenda for im/politeness Research". *Journal of Pragmatics* 86: 11–18.

Watts, Richard (2003): *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wetzel, Patricia J. (1988): "Are 'powerless' communication strategies the Japanese Norm". *Language in Society* 17/4: 555–564.

Wichmann, Anne (2005): "Please: From courtesy to appeal: The role of intonation in the expression of attitudinal meaning". *English Language and Linguistics* 9/2: 229–253.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1985): "Different cultures, different languages, different speech acts: Polish vs. English". *Journal of Pragmatics* 9/2–3: 145–178.

Wierzbicka, Anna (1991): *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics. The Semantics of Human Interaction*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wolfson, Nessa (1983): "An empirically based analysis of complimenting in American English". In: Wolfson, Nessa/Judd, Elliot (eds.): *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA, Newbury House: 82–95.

Wolfson, Nessa (1981): “Invitations, compliments and the competence of the native speaker”. *International Journal of Psycholinguistics* 8/4: 7–22.

Würtz, Elizabeth (2006): “Intercultural communication on web sites: A cross-cultural analysis of web sites from high-context cultures and low-context cultures”. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11: 274–299.

Zeidenitz, Stefan/Barkow, Ben (2005): *The Xenophobe’s Guide to the Germans*. London: Oval Books.