

# The Risk of Polite Misunderstandings

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## Abstract

We review evidence showing that politeness taxes mental resources and creates confusion about what is truly meant during interactions. While this confusion can be useful in low-stakes situations, it can have negative, even dangerous consequences in high-stakes situations such as flying a plane in an emergency or helping a patient decide on a course of treatment. Unfortunately, high-stakes situations are especially conducive to politeness-based misunderstandings. Although policies that discourage politeness in high-stakes situations are undergoing empirical assessment, we suggest that research is needed on the nonverbal cues that help people disambiguate polite statements.

## Keywords

politeness, cognition, communication, risk

## Clarity or Politeness

In his 2008 book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell devotes a whole chapter to the hypothesis that politeness crashes planes. Gladwell reports chilling examples of crew members using ambiguous, diffident phrasings that do not appropriately convey the seriousness of their situation (for a more academic treatment than Gladwell's, see Cushing, 1997). One example involves a first officer repeatedly trying to tell the captain that there is dangerous amount of ice on the wings. Instead of saying just that, the first officer starts by saying, "Look how the ice is just hanging on his, ah, back there, see that?" The second attempt goes, "See all those icicles on the back there and everything?" The third attempt goes, "Boy, this is a, this is a losing battle here on trying to de-ice those things, it [gives] you a false feeling of security, that's all it does." And finally, "Let's check those [wing] tops again, since we've been sitting here a while." At this point, however, the plane is about to take off, and it will crash a short while after.

In this and other dramatic examples, crew members are sacrificing clarity in favor of politeness. Rather than maximizing the likelihood that other people understand what they mean, they use ambiguous turns of phrase showing tact, respect, or deference. This is certainly fine in everyday life, when it often makes sense to downplay or obfuscate one's meaning (Lee & Pinker, 2010). For example, there is no benefit in bluntly stating that a partner's new haircut is botched—it is wiser to call it "original" instead. This tendency to obfuscate, though, might lead to catastrophic misunderstandings in high-stakes situations, when clarity is critical. The problem is that the very situations that would benefit from clarity are also especially conducive to politeness.

Flying a plane in an emergency is a situation demanding high-level collective cognition, in which several persons need to share information in order to solve problems and make decisions. There are many other situations that require high-level cognition, although not many with such high stakes as safely landing a plane. Rather, the stakes and the nature of the information that must be shared vary on a scale from the trivial to the highly sensitive. At some point on that scale, politeness will become a concern.

As long as the information to be shared is trivial, there is no pressing reason to use politeness, and we can afford to be direct. But when information becomes offending or embarrassing; when it implicitly points out others' mistakes, bad choices, or bad prospects; or when it requires the disclosure facts that one would rather keep quiet about, it is no longer shared bluntly but politely instead. The more sensitive the information is, the more elaborate the politeness strategy that needs be applied (Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987, Holtgraves, 2005; various contextual factors can increase the need for politeness over and beyond how sensitive the information is—for example, the power differential between the actors or their degree of acquaintance).

Beyond a certain point, politeness strategies require one to sacrifice clarity in order to show respect or concern for the opinions and feelings of others. For example, instead of bluntly asserting something like, "Your report needs more work," one

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may hedge (“Your report might need a little more work”) or even limit oneself to making an indirect allusion (“Good reports need work”). In both cases, one trades off clarity for politeness—that is, increasing the risk of being misunderstood while decreasing the risk of offending or upsetting the other party. In the next section, we review some empirical evidence that politeness is likely to create greater confusion and at a greater cognitive cost. One must think harder when considering the possibility that other people are being polite, and this greater difficulty leaves one in a greater state of uncertainty about what is really meant. In the final section, we consider various escape routes from politeness-based misunderstandings.

### Harder Processing for Greater Confusion

What does it mean that something will “possibly” happen? In a broad sense, “possibly” could denote any probability greater than 0, up to and including a probability of 1 (i.e., certainty). In daily life, however, the meaning of such a term is considerably narrowed, and “possibly” typically conveys a probability that is neither very high nor very low. This interpretation is based on the assumption that people use language efficiently, optimizing the clarity and economy of their messages (Noveck & Reboul, 2008; Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995). The reasoning here is that if you knew something was bound to happen, you would say just that—and if you do not say it is bound to happen, it is because you do not believe the probability is 1.

For example, Bonnefon and Villejoubert (2006) asked several hundred participants to imagine that after their annual checkup, a doctor announced they would “possibly” experience insomnia during the coming year. There appeared to be a consensus among participants that the doctor used the term “possibly” because she was not sure about her prediction (83% said so) and that their probability of experiencing insomnia was neither too high nor too low (typically around .55). In another condition, though, Bonnefon and Villejoubert increased the stakes by asking participants to imagine that the doctor announced they would possibly become deaf in the incoming year. The goal of this manipulation was to cross the threshold at which politeness starts to complicate communication (i.e., the threshold at which the unsettling or offending nature of what is meant can justify the use of politeness). It was expected that participants would no longer be sure whether the doctor was genuinely uncertain about the announcement or whether she wanted to be tactful about something that was both very bad and very probable. This is exactly what happened. In that condition, participants were split 40/60 between the two interpretations. The 40% who thought the doctor was genuinely uncertain continued to see the probability of deafness as being around .55, but the 60% who thought the doctor was being tactful saw the probability of deafness as being around .75.

Pighin and Bonnefon (in press) followed up on these results by asking a sample of 500 pregnant women to consider hypothetical dialogues with doctors. For example, participants

imagined a situation in which they knew the therapy would change if the pain decreased and in which the doctor said the pain would “possibly” decrease. In this situation, most participants judged that the therapy would possibly change—that is, they simply transferred the uncertainty about the pain decreasing to the uncertainty about changing the therapy. In another condition, though, they were told that the therapy would change if the pain *increased* and that the doctor said the pain would “possibly” increase. Once again, the goal of the manipulation was to cross the politeness threshold: While there is no need to be tactful when considering the possibility that pain would decrease, considering the upsetting possibility that the pain would increase might require politeness and, thus, bring confusion about what the doctor really meant. As anticipated, participants in that condition were split about what the doctor meant: For each participant who thought that the therapy would possibly change, another thought that the therapy would probably or certainly change.

Demeure, Bonnefon, and Raufaste (2009) investigated another situation in which politeness can become a complication—that of pointing out mistakes. Participants considered hypothetical dialogues between workers discussing a new piece of machinery. In a typical dialogue, one worker said, “If the water level is low, the machine stops,” and another replied, “If the oil level is low, the machine stops.” One critical measure was whether participants understood this reply as correcting a mistake made by the first worker (i.e., the machine stops if the oil level is low but not when the water level is low). Because the reply is a rather inefficient way to phrase a correction, it should not be construed that way in a control condition (and indeed it was not). That should change, however, if the politeness threshold is crossed—that is, if contextual factors suggest that the second worker might be engaging in polite rather than efficient communication. One such factor is the personality of the first worker. If the first worker is a difficult person who easily gets upset when contradicted, it would make sense for others to use unclear but tactful phrasing when correcting him or her. And indeed, when the first worker was described that way, participants were split about the meaning of the reply, with 55% now considering it was in fact a tactful correction.

Finally, Bonnefon, Feeney, and Villejoubert (2009) investigated a classic example of efficient communication, the use of the word “some.” Sentences such as “Some people loved your talk” are typically understood as implying that not all did, and that it is put that way for efficiency reasons: If everyone loved the talk, it would be most informative to say just that, instead of merely saying that some did. And indeed, 83% of participants in the study of Bonnefon et al. (2009) thought that not everyone loved the talk. In another condition, though, participants had to interpret sentences such as “Some people hated your talk.” The goal of this manipulation was to cross the politeness threshold. It was anticipated that participants would no longer be sure whether the statement was used efficiently (and thus that not everyone hated the talk) or whether it was merely a polite understatement (and thus that everyone hated

the talk). And indeed, participants were split about 60/40 between the efficient and the polite interpretations.

Convergent experimental findings thus suggest that whenever a situation crosses the politeness threshold (i.e., whenever there is a substantial risk that people might get upset), confusion arises about the meaning of statements that would otherwise be clear. This confusion is likely to create problems and misunderstandings in high-stakes situations, which are precisely those most likely to cross the politeness threshold. Worse still, it appears that processing politeness taxes cognitive resources. That is, not only will high-stakes situations be likely to create politeness-based confusion, this greater confusion will be bought at the cost of harder cognitive processing. One line of evidence comes from a series of experiments by Stephan, Liberman, and Trope (2010), who found that politeness related to an abstract level of construal: People were more polite when primed to think more abstractly (by specific experimental protocols) and thought more abstractly when processing politeness. These findings suggest that people might need to recruit additional cognitive resources when they consider the possibility that a statement might be used politely.

This hypothesis received direct support from a study conducted by Bonnefon, De Neys, and Feeney (2011). This study investigated the effect of concurrent mental load on the interpretation of statements that crossed the politeness threshold (e.g., “some people hated your talk”). Half of the participants had to interpret these statements while retaining in memory a complex gridlike pattern of dots that had been flashed before them for less than 1 second. The purpose of this manipulation was to decrease the cognitive resources available to interpret the sentences and to observe whether participants would find it harder to consider that the statement could be meant politely. The polite interpretation of “Some people hated your talk” is that perhaps everyone hated the talk. In line with prior findings, 55% participants reached this interpretation when all their cognitive resources were available. If this interpretation is costly in cognitive resources, it should be less frequent under mental load—and this is what happened. Under mental load, only 44% participants reached the polite interpretation of the statements. It appears that situations crossing the politeness threshold impose a special cognitive burden on people, only to leave them in greater confusion.

## Escape Routes

Politeness taxes mental resources and creates confusion as to what is truly meant. While this confusion is functional in low-stakes situations, it can have untoward consequences in high-stakes situations such as flying a plane in an emergency or helping a patient decide on a treatment. Medical situations deserve special attention in that regard, because some patients may have an even harder time processing politeness than the general population. For example, recent studies suggested that Parkinson’s patients may show early deficits in interpreting and producing polite statements (Holtgraves & McNamara,

2010; McNamara, Holtgraves, Durso, & Harris, 2010). In this final section, we consider potential solutions for minimizing politeness-based confusion when this confusion is undesirable. The problem is that high-stakes situations encourage people to express themselves politely and that polite statements are hard to interpret. Consequently, there are two logical options for minimizing confusion: (a) encourage people to be less polite in high-stakes situations or (b) make polite statements easier to interpret.

The first option has mostly been a managerial pursuit so far. For more than two decades, airlines across the world have included assertiveness training in their Crew Resource Management programs, the goal of which is to encourage clarity over politeness when communicating potentially upsetting information (similar programs were more recently developed in the healthcare domain, and other technical environments have gone further and developed special communication protocols aimed at maximizing clarity). The benefits of these programs are still unclear, however, both at the general level and at the specific level of assertiveness training (Salas, Wilson, Burke, & Wightman, 2006).

The second option (making polite statements easier to interpret) would require further investigations of the implicit communicative cues that can help disambiguate polite statements. Prosody, facial expression, gestures, and posture are all good candidates for such an investigation. Indeed, this strategy is driving an upcoming field of research in Artificial Intelligence, which aims at developing *embodied conversational agents*. These artificial characters are meant to communicate with humans in a natural way. As a consequence, they must be endowed with the capacity to produce all the extralinguistic cues that help disambiguate their verbal statements. Polite statements have been specifically targeted in that respect (Rehm & André, 2007), and it already appears that some extralinguistic cues can be used to recognize a polite intention (e.g., speakers who use terms such as “perhaps” or “a little” for politeness purposes tend to display hand movements to the body). Identifying the signals that help people disambiguate polite statements could be a promising road to solve the challenge of polite misunderstandings in high-stakes, high-level cognition, thanks to a convergence between the fields of linguistics, psychology, and Artificial Intelligence.

## Recommended Readings

- Bonnefon, J. F., Feeney, A., & Villejoubert, G. (2009). (See References). A representative series of studies including a number of measures and control conditions not discussed in the present article.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). (See References). The historical classic on politeness theory, cited in thousands of research papers.
- Holtgraves, T. (2005). (See References). A highly accessible introduction to linguistic politeness for social and cognitive psychologists.
- Lee, J., & Pinker, S. (2010). (See References). A thorough examination of the reasons why obfuscation of meaning can be functional in everyday life.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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