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Dangerous politeness? Understandings of politeness in the COVID-19 era and beyond

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Abstract: What (im)politeness means changes over time. As these changes are usually gradual, we tend to be relatively unaware of them. However, when changes are abrupt, people not only notice but are also concerned with them. The COVID-19 pandemic entailed such abrupt changes involving new rules most of which are at odds with the rather automatic conventions of politeness that we follow. My aim in this paper is to explore what politeness means to non-academics in the context of the pandemic and how similar or different their understandings are from academic accounts. To this end, I will draw from an online article entitled “Your politeness is a public health hazard”, which appeared at the onset of the pandemic, and the user-generated comments it triggered. The discussion is placed within the discursive turn in (im)politeness research, considering its key distinction between first-order and second-order conceptualisations of politeness. The findings suggest that politeness in the pandemic is still mostly understood as consideration for the other, an understanding shared with (im)politeness research. However, posters’ views are broader overlapping with understandings of ‘civility’. These views manifest their knowledge as observers and participants of social reality but also reveal that they are in dialogue with work in philosophy, sociology and psychology.

Keywords: COVID-19; (im)politeness; (in)civility; respect

1 Introduction

What (im)politeness means in a community is frequently contested and changes over time. As changes are usually gradual, we tend to be relatively unaware of them. However, when change is abrupt and pervasive, people not only notice changes but are also concerned with them. Thus, the discursive struggle over what politeness means or should mean becomes more salient. Even though not experienced in the same way in every community, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to entail such abrupt...
changes, as it is a time of disruption, uncertainty and disagreement on various levels. The new rules are unclear and most of them “deeply at odds with widely practiced and deeply ingrained sociocultural patterns of behavior in societies such as ours” (Blommaert 2020). In these upsetting times, it would be interesting to explore current lay conceptualisations of politeness and their relationship to academic accounts on the same issue.

My aim in this paper is to explore (1) what politeness means to non-academics in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and (2) how similar or different these views are from academic accounts that have been put forth in the years debating on the issue. In the process, I will consider the challenges non-academics notice and experience and the changes they envision as a result of the pandemic.

To this end, I will draw from an online article entitled “Your politeness is a public health hazard” and the user-generated comments it triggered. The article appeared at the onset of the pandemic and, thus, the views expressed should be seen in that context. These comments appear to reflect mostly elite, Western understandings of politeness and the pandemic itself. A cursory look at the dataset suggests that most commenters view politeness as consideration for the other but also link it with concepts such as respect, tolerance, authenticity and assertiveness. Consideration is a concept frequently encountered in (im)politeness research whereas the other concepts are more popular in other fields such as philosophy, sociology and psychology. This then indicates that posters’ understandings of politeness are broader than those typically found in impoliteness research.

The inspiration for this exploration stemmed from my interest in non-academic conceptualisations of politeness, that is, the various ways that polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of a community (Watts et al. 1992: 3). Such work falls under the umbrella of ‘metapragmatics’, which refers to the study of language users’ reflexive awareness of their use of language (Verschueren 2000). Thus, the discussion will be placed within the discursive turn in (im)politeness research and the key distinction drawn between first-order and second-order conceptualisations of politeness (e.g., Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Watts et al. 1992).

The paper is organised as follows. The next section (Section 2) is divided into two subsections. The introductory paragraphs look at the difficulty of defining politeness and refer briefly to Brown and Levinson’s (1987 [1978]) highly influential theory of politeness. This is followed by Subsection 2.1 which presents the discursive turn to (im)politeness research focusing on the importance it attaches on non-academic understandings of politeness. Subsection 2.2 delves into the positive and, more specifically, into the negative aspects of politeness bringing to the fore a negative aspect that the pandemic has brought to the surface, that of its being dangerous. Section 3 describes the data and methodology used in this study. Section 4 is divided into four subsections which encompass the analysis of the data, i.e., how posters
conceptualise politeness. Subsection 4.1 looks briefly at expressive politeness, i.e., the posters’ actual use of (im)politeness in their posts. Subsection 4.2 looks at concepts posters associate with politeness, such as respect and authenticity, some of which clearly draw from disciplines outside pragmatics. Subsection 4.3 considers issues related to non-verbal aspects of politeness which have been largely ignored in (im)politeness research but seem to have acquired special significance during the pandemic. The final Subsection 4.4 presents posters’ outlook of the future of politeness in the then current situation. Finally, Section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

2 What does politeness mean?

Despite the abundance of research on politeness and the “myriad of different definitions and interpretations” (Eelen 2001: 1), there is no simple answer as to what politeness means and how it is manifested. Politeness researchers have talked about politeness as “a slippery, ultimately indefinable quality of interaction” (Watts 2005: xiii). It is, in fact, the case that neither researchers nor ordinary speakers agree as to what counts as polite (Haugh 2019: 201). To complicate things even further, the near synonym “civility” is frequently used in related fields outside pragmatics for closely related phenomena, but there is very little interaction between (im)politeness and (in)civility researchers.

As is well known, Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) and Leech (1983) are the founders of modern politeness research with Brown and Levinson’s (henceforth B&L) theory certainly being the most prominent (Eelen 2001: 3). Despite the criticisms it received (see, e.g., Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003) on a number of grounds, their model has been highly influential and some of its terminology and concepts are still being used and are useful. For instance, their concepts of positive and negative politeness, but not necessarily the distinction between the two, even though contested (e.g., Brown and Gilman 1989; García-Conejos Blitvich 2010b; Haugh 2006; O’Driscoll 1996; Scollon and Scollon 1981), are, in my view, significant and seem to have acquired special significance in the COVID-19 era. Positive politeness, also called solidarity or involvement politeness, is based on highlighting interest and approval between interlocutors and shared wants and knowledge (B&L 1987: 101). This is different from what they call negative politeness, our familiar distancing or independence politeness, whose focus is on avoiding imposing on the other. Succinctly put, negative politeness involves forms for social distancing while positive politeness forms for minimising social distance (B&L 1987: 130; see also O’Driscoll 2017: 106–107).
2.1 Discursive approaches

Criticisms against B&L’s theory have led scholars to suggest alternative models of conceptualising (im)politeness. Of these, the so-called discursive (later called second-wave) approaches have been the most influential, within which the focus of attention shifted to how interlocutors perceive and use politeness rather than imposing theoretical constructs on interlocutors’ productions. This then brought to the surface an earlier distinction between lay or first-order and theoretical or second-order conceptualisations of politeness (e.g., Eelen 2001; Watts 2003; Watts et al. 1992). It was argued that lay understandings should be the central focus, the object of investigation, and the starting point of scientific analyses (Eelen 2001: 252, 253) rather than the construction of theories which do not “correspond to native speakers’ everyday conceptualisations of the term” (Watts 2003: 9).

Despite its being attractive, it soon became evident that a neat distinction between first-order and second-order politeness cannot be maintained (e.g., Haugh 2007, 2012, 2016; Haugh and Culpeper 2018; Mills 2003: 8). Terkourafi (2011) has shown their intimate intertwining and Kádár and Haugh (2013: 254) advocate that “first-order and second-order understandings are not mutually exclusive” (original emphasis) since “there are inevitably multiple understandings of politeness at play”. They propose a refinement that goes beyond a single dichotomy and illustrate this by suggesting that, for instance, folk-theoretic understandings constitute second-order conceptualisations since “they involve observation rather than participation in the social world” (Kádár and Haugh 2013: 85, original emphasis). I would agree with them but suggest that we should envision clines rather than dichotomies. My suggestion of a cline stems from the assumption that in the same way that politeness researchers do not constitute a homogeneous group since they have different theoretical orientations and different agendas, ordinary observers of social reality draw from various sources and may express views differing to varying extents from those of specialists. Thus, neither academic views, nor more so those of ordinary people, are unified wholes which can be contrasted. In fact, there is interaction between them. As Angouri (2018: 8) rightly contends, second order theories “spread into the first order and provide a language for deconstructing and reconstructing experience”. Conversely, many theoretical concepts are redefined everyday terms (Haugh 2016; Reich et al. 2009: 3). Thus, there is a bidirectional movement between scientific and non-scientific concepts affecting each other.

Dichotomies are attractive and “important to human thinking” (Jeffries 2010: 10) “because they offer order in a complex sphere” (Hymes 1986: 49) but they are at the same time problematic. As Hymes (1986: 50) insightfully observes, they “do us
the service of naming diversity” but the disservice of reducing it to polar opposites. Thus, through dichotomies, diversity is attenuated if not lost (Hymes 1986: 49), possible similarities are obscured, and any middle ground alternatives are backgrounded or ignored.

The initial overemphasis in discursive accounts on interlocutors’ understandings and interpretations in interactional data led to relegating the analyst’s role to a secondary position. This problem was resolved by approaches which attempted to combine interlocutors’ and analysts’ perspectives, a development which marked the so-called third wave of (im)politeness research (Ogiermann and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019: 7; see also Culpeper 2011; Grainger 2011; Haugh 2007; Ogiermann 2019; Terkourafi 2005).1 Following this line of thought and maintaining my position as a “legitimate” analyst (Holmes 2005; Tzanne 2021), in this paper I focus on posters’ understandings drawing support for my interpretations of these from theoretical evidence not only from politeness research but also from related fields outside pragmatics.

Despite the fact that first-order politeness initially referred to common sense concepts (Eelen 2001: 32), research interest was channelled primarily to analysing the sequential development of real-life interactions. However, non-academic understandings of (im)politeness can emerge not only in interactional data but also in discussions concerning the topic of (im)politeness itself in sources such as online articles and ensuing comments. Just like language issues, issues related to (im)politeness are not the exclusive playground of (im)politeness scholars as non-academics and non-specialists also evaluate instances of (im)politeness they encounter and discuss what constitutes (in)appropriate behaviour for them. The views expressed may draw not only from experiential and social norms (Culpeper 2008: 29) but also from knowledge and information non-specialists may have, especially nowadays given the expansion of Internet use, among others. It would, thus, be interesting to explore how participants in such offline and online discussions understand (im)politeness.

I should add at this point that I prefer the terms ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ rather than ‘scientific’ and ‘lay’ understandings because the labels ‘lay’ and ‘scientific’ are rather inadequate and ideologically challenging (Xie et al. 2005: 449). Dichotomies invite evaluation which carries ideological meanings in that the one member tends to be seen as good, precise or rational and the other as its

1 Let me note that traditional approaches to politeness (e.g., B&L 1987 [1978]) have been termed first-wave approaches whereas discursive approaches marked the beginning of the second wave (see, e.g., Culpeper 2011; Grainger 2011). Even though the distinction between first- and second-waves is rather clear, this is not the case between the second and the third waves (see, e.g. Locher and Larina 2019; Ogiermann and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019). For a brief overview, see Culpeper and Haugh (2021).
opposite (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997: 145; Hymes 1986: 50). In the case of ‘scientific’ and ‘lay’, the educated expert is contrasted with the conservative lay person who expresses stereotypical views. The terms ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ understandings are more objective, even though the inherent evaluativity in the dichotomy cannot be avoided.

Nowadays, the Internet has offered a public space for readers to voice their standpoints, experiences and resulting emotions through the comments they can post at the end of articles written by journalists (e.g., Rowe 2015; Santana 2014). Sometimes these comments are civil, but research into online communication has raised concerns about the rampant incivility in most such contexts, especially when commenters are anonymous (see, e.g., Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2014; Dynel 2015; Rowe 2015; Santana 2014; Thurlow et al. 2004). Impoliteness, once “the long neglected ‘poor cousin’ of politeness” (Locher and Bousfield 2008: 2), has now “become one of the most researched topics in pragmatics in the 21st century” (Sinkeviciute 2015: 317), especially as regards online interaction. It is perhaps the time to give some attention to politeness again, especially in online contexts. This paper aims to contribute to this direction.

### 2.2 Good, bad and dangerous politeness

In general, politeness tends to be viewed as a “good thing” (Leech 2014: 4). For instance, people post comments to social media to complain about impolite behaviours they have encountered. Journalists write articles usually decrying the increase in impoliteness, especially in online contexts (see, e.g., Rowe 2015; Santana 2014). People worry about its future because politeness is presumably desirable and they sense the danger of losing it (Ellis 2001: 106).

However, politeness is not always interpreted as a desirable aspect of behaviour (see, e.g., Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003) as it has also been associated with affectation and hypocrisy. For instance, as Watts (2003: 2) maintains, there are people for whom polite use of language is understood as “hypocritical”, “distant”, “unfeeling”, etc. For his part, Eelen (2001: 36) contends that politeness may be viewed “as an outward mask, an insincere performance delivered for the sake of displaying good manners, or even worse, the manipulative use of politeness”. Such negative readings of politeness are neither recent nor specific to English. In eighteenth century writing, politeness was attacked as “a form of coercion” or as a “focus on the tyrannies of convention” (Davidson 2004: 8). Pizziconi (2011) discusses the association between Japanese honorifics and hypocrisy, and for Blum-Kulka's (1992: 257) Israeli informants, politeness is associated with desirable values but it is “simultaneously referred to in a negative manner as something external,
hypocritical, unnatural”. This dual nature of politeness, i.e., being seen in both positive and negative terms, harks back to Bergson’s (2016 [1892]) discussion of material politeness and politeness of the heart and is evident in the distinction between “politeness of the soul/heart” and “politeness of manners” drawn by various groups such as Greeks, Turks and Polish (Bayraktaroğlu and Sifianou 2001: 7; Ogiermann and Suszczyńska 2011; see also Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2011: 142). The former is assumed to reflect the essence of what is perceived to be genuine/sincere politeness whereas the latter may be hypocritical, a mask hiding true intentions. This is a thought-provoking distinction as it points to the relationship between politeness and morality. As Terkourafi (2011: 178 drawing on Eelen 2001) observes, when politeness is seen as devoid of moral content, it becomes “mere conduct” which can be seen as hypocritical or insincere.

Surprising as it may sound, the pandemic has brought to the surface another negative aspect of politeness, that of its being dangerous or even fatal for both us and others, an issue highlighted by the author of the online article. It is not difficult to imagine how impoliteness can be dangerous. A chilling example is offered by Coulmas (1992: 299) regarding a Japanese man who was murdered by a socially superior colleague because of the incorrect use of a term of address. Less dramatic but equally dangerous examples are provided by Flin (2010) who states that being the victim of rudeness or simply witnessing rudeness can impair cognitive skills. Offensive language\(^2\) and behaviour can be encountered in any workplace but as Flin (2010: 213) contends “rude language and hostile behaviour among healthcare professionals pose a serious threat to patient safety and the quality of care”. It is, thus, clear that impoliteness can have dangerous effects for task performance. However, it is more difficult to imagine how politeness can be dangerous and yet this is not a novel aspect, but one that has gone largely unnoticed. As Morgan (2020) states, “[t]rue crime and #MeToo narratives are full of stories of women ignoring an internal alarm bell for fear of being rude”. And these may be just one set of examples of instances of people suffering in silence for fear of being seen as impolite. There are other cases where the danger does not lurk in silence but in the ambiguities of indirectness.

For instance, Moore (1992) attributes the 1986 Challenger disaster to the politeness strategies used between engineers and managers at NASA, which contributed to ambiguities in their interactions and thus to poor communication with devastating results. As he (1992: 275) illustrates, “[w]hen communication is blurred and muffled because of a subordinate’s fear of being sanctioned, then management—and organizations—suffer, and disasters can occur”. In this event, negative politeness strategies, such as hedging, be pessimistic, and give association

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2 For an in-depth account of offensive language, see O’Driscoll (2020).
clues crept into a context where interactions should have been unambiguously clear, since lives and extremely high costs in addition to the name of NASA were at stake. Relatedly, Gladwell (2008) provides chilling examples of how mitigation is responsible for aviation accidents (see also Bonnefon et al. 2011).

For the commenters in this study, the danger of being polite or rather the fear of not being seen as impolite is not associated with silence and indirectness but with distancing and haptic behaviour. In addition, the danger more clearly operates on both the polite person and the recipient of the politeness.³ Any interaction in close proximity and without protective face masks can spread virus-laden droplets which can be fatal. Any handshaking, hugging or embracing may transfer the virus and are, thus, seen as dangerous acts. On the other hand, telling people that they should obey the new rules of distancing may not be easy as they may feel offended. So, a number of issues arise which relate to providing unsolicited advice, distancing and handshaking, i.e., issues which fall within the realm of polite behaviour.

### 3 Methodology and data

The pandemic has resulted in a proliferation of articles mostly on medical issues but also a lot which relate to social issues. The data for this paper come from an article entitled “Your politeness is a public health hazard” which was posted soon after the onset of the pandemic (on April 4, 2020) to the Forge.medium.com website and the user-generated comments it triggered.⁴ The article received 2,731 claps and 39 comments of which 3 are responses/reactions to one of the main comments while the rest are in dialogue mostly with the journalist.

I downloaded the article and the ensuing comments and numbered the comments consecutively deleting authors’ names for reasons of anonymity but leaving typos and other infelicities intact. My data is admittedly very limited. In addition, it appears to reflect elite, Western views of politeness and the pandemic itself. So, I am not going to draw any generalisations, as I am interested in the “situated understandings of participants themselves” (Haugh 2016: 43), but use it as a simple case study or as a snapshot of social reality for issues that (im)politeness and also (in)civility research could perhaps reflect on. As regards ethical considerations, the article and the comments were and are still public and not password protected.⁵

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³ I owe this comment to Jim O’Driscoll, personal communication.

⁴ https://forge.medium.com/your-politeness-is-a-public-health-hazard-f1b76a134666.

⁵ It should be noted that recently, as stated on the site, only the “most relevant” comments appear, which is, in fact, the majority of them (i.e., 35, accessed 31 March 2023).
In this kind of data, posters articulate and co-construct their understandings of politeness. It is not elicited data but naturally-occurring, perhaps spontaneous contributions to the topic under discussion based on posters’ experiences, knowledge, beliefs and ideologies. Such data may reveal aspects of (im)politeness that may not emerge in mundane everyday interactions and, thus, result in more unexpected insights.

The journalist/author, Kate Morgan, seems to have interviewed Thomas Holtgraves (a social psychologist), Jacqueline Whitmore (an etiquette expert) and Stephanie Gravalese (a marketing professional), and drawing mostly on Holtgraves’ views and hyperlinked sources, she raises a number of issues which then become the source of the posters’ comments, who, in addition, contribute their own views.

The author starts with a personal experience in a supermarket to highlight how difficult it is to practise social distancing given the largely automatic nature of our deeply ingrained conventions of politeness. Drawing on Gravalese’s views, she says that politeness can be strenuous when one decides not to respond in kind to a rude comment and even dangerous when one senses danger but does not react for fear of being seen as rude. The journalist adds that nowadays, this fear has morphed into a new kind of danger since any interaction in close proximity can transmit germs⁶ noting further that it is ironic that sticking to our old polite practices during the pandemic can be dangerous for both us and others. The author suggests that if we feel uncomfortable because somebody is too close to us, we do not have to suffer in silence. We can tell them but indirectly, so as not to embarrass them or make them defensive. If, however, indirectness threatens clarity, we have to be direct and clear providing verbal and/or non-verbal explanation, a view shared by both Holtgraves and Whitmore. The journalist ends by drawing on Holtgraves again saying that politeness will not disappear but change, that is, we may become more dependent on language than on physical touch and that if some rituals like handshaking weaken others will emerge.

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⁶ As one reviewer rightly noted “this is certainly nothing new; what is new is the type of virus being transmitted and human’s reduced immunity to it”. S/he also added that “Asian cultures have been traditionally more mindful about contagion during illness, flu season for instance, and wearing masks in public has been a staple (even the norm or strong expectation) of such groups”. In fact, one poster makes this point explicitly when she says “Interesting article, Kate Morgan. After many years in Japan, it feels too personal and unhygienic shaking strangers’ hands sometimes”, an issue also implied in example 12 [post 13] below.
4 What has politeness come to mean during the pandemic?

4.1 Expressive politeness

Even though I am interested in the metapragmatics of politeness, that is, how these posters appear to conceptualise politeness during the pandemic, I would like to note before presenting their views that their understandings of politeness are also inferrable from their interactional conduct (Haugh 2012: 122).

In this connection, it is immediately noticeable that all but one comments are highly civil. Ample evidence of this is that many posters congratulate, praise or thank the journalist for the article either at the beginning or at the end of their posts or at both places. For example:

1 [post 2]
That was a wonderfully written article … Looking forward to future articles.

2 [post 3]
I appreciate your article … Thank you again for the article.

Moreover, even though some posters disagree with others’ views or those of the journalist and of the scholars cited, this is done mostly in a way that does not offend. There is only one comment, which is against indirectness and can be perceived as rather rude:

3 [post 34]
Fuck this coddling nonsense! Just BE DIRECT. If everyone were more direct and everyone expected that to be the case, we’d have far (far) fewer problems in the world!

By the way, one can notice here, how this poster relates his/her suggested change with the need for change of expectations, echoing (im)politeness research concerns. More specifically, as (im)politeness researchers have repeatedly argued, we deem behaviour as polite if it abides by the interactional expectations of the specific situation (see, e.g., Culpeper 2011; Eelen 2001; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2010a; Kádár and Haugh 2013; Spencer-Oatey 2005).

7 The examples are numbered consecutively in the text with the numbers in square brackets indicating the number of the post in my dataset.
4.2 Concepts related to politeness

The journalist does not tell us explicitly how politeness is conceptualised; for her whatever it is, it is in our DNA, it is automatic despite differences and instructs us to prioritise the feelings of others. Moreover, the journalist focuses on the current situation, whereas the posters expand on this and raise various issues related to politeness. For instance, one poster poses the issue of cross-cultural differences and challenges the journalist’s view that politeness is in our DNA, stating that:

4 [post 20]

As a Finn I can assure you that politeness has a very different meaning in other cultures … social distancing is in our culture, but not in our DNA

For the journalist, the major dilemma, at this time, is how to remain safe without offending. In other words, remaining safe endangers politeness and practising politeness can become dangerous, a kind of moral dilemma (see, e.g., Márquez Reiter 2021). Most posters agree with this and also introduce concepts associated not only with politeness but also civility, as we will see below.

The concepts mentioned or elaborated on include friendliness, care and concern, respect, honesty, kindness, tolerance and authenticity. Posters also mention helping each other, view politeness as a virtue and consider its link to emotions. For example:

5 [post 11]

We do this [control negative emotions] is by showing care and concern to eachother. In essense, one way we do this is by being polite.

6 [post 19]

We need to be patient with each other as we all acclimate to this new norm at different paces.

7 [post 5]

We are here to help each other and not condemn those that aren't understanding.

The underlying thread linking the views of both the journalist and the posters is consideration for the other and their feelings. This is not surprising as consideration is a universal characteristic of politeness (Watts 2003: 30) and “is frequently invoked in both lay and academic understandings of politeness” (Haugh 2019: 209). The term consideration itself is not used explicitly, which is in accord with Haugh’s (2019: 209) finding that it is not as salient as other terms, but rather is conceptually
mediated through them. Despite views which associate consideration exclusively with negative politeness, Haugh (2019: 213) finds that consideration is understood in two broad senses: as (non-)imposition and also as (non-)attentiveness. Politeness is frequently defined as “mutually shared forms of consideration for others”, “often at the expense of one’s own interests” (Watts 2003: 31, 50). The journalist’s understanding appears to be very similar when she states that “[p]oliteness drives us to prioritize the feelings of other people, sometimes strangers, over our own safety” and adds that “in the case of Covid-19, politeness can mean jeopardizing other people’s safety, too”. This “sense of obligation that human beings feel toward one another” reflects the essence of human morality (Tomasello 2018: 72) and underpins the interrelationship of (im)politeness and morality that emerges in the data. For instance, a poster says that we should be patient with one another and quoting an unidentified source s/he states that:

8 [post 19]

The moment we stop fighting for each other, that’s the moment we lose our humanity.

This relationship between (im)politeness and morality has recently started attracting (im)politeness researchers’ attention (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár 2021 for a detailed overview). On the other hand, morality has always been a staple in discussions of (in)civility, a conceptually closely related term. This conceptual proximity of (im)politeness and (in)civility is reflected in the fact that the terms are sometimes used interchangeably by both academics and non-academics.

Related to morality and, in my view, particularly interesting is the association between respect and politeness that emerges in the data.8 In politeness research, respect has been traditionally associated with negative politeness which has also been called “respect politeness” (Brown 2015: 327). This essentially includes a conceptualisation of respect as verbal behaviour manifested through terms of address, T/V personal pronouns and honorifics (Haugh 2010: 272), that is, it is largely associated with linguistic forms which tend to be directed to superiors and strangers. However, this is a restricted understanding of respect, ignoring what has been called “unconditional respect” which relates to “a broad humanistic perspective whereby respect denotes the value accorded to each person as a human being” (Mayseless and Scharf 2009: 280; see also Buss 1999; Reich et al. 2009), a view which echoes Kant’s moral philosophy. Interestingly, this aspect of respect has been a central issue in understandings of (in)civility. For instance, for Calhoun

8 For an association between consideration and respect see Haugh (2019: 211) and for differences between the two, see Reich et al. (2009).
(2000: 255, original emphasis), “[t]he function of civility … is to communicate basic moral attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness”. It should be noted that all three attitudes are raised by posters. One poster mentions this broader understanding of respect and also sees politeness as a virtue, saying:

And there’s one line [in her readings] that stuck with me saying that any member of society is worthy of respect. … this virtue [politeness] is telling people to respect others’ feelings, wishes, and rights, including the right to health.

Even though recent research on morality and (im)politeness broaches related issues, (im)politeness research has not concerned itself with whether politeness is a virtue or not. However, it is an issue that has preoccupied sociologists and philosophers for a long time and also surfaces in non-academic understandings of politeness probably as a result of that. Whether politeness is a virtue or not is a controversial issue. For instance, Comte-Sponville (2001: 10) argues that even though politeness is not a virtue, it serves as the foundation for the moral development of the individual. In other words, “[g]ood manners precede and prepare the way for good deeds”. In contrast, in her article, tellingly entitled “Civility is a virtue”, Calhoun (2000: 254) argues in detail that “civility is a distinct and important moral virtue”. Similarly for Buss (1999: 795–796), courtesy is a virtue and being discourteous is not only impolite but also immoral. This association between morality and civility is neither new nor restricted to certain communities as it has been evident in everyday discourse in many parts of the world since ancient times (Terkoura 2011, 2019). One can find this association in Aristotle (Nicomachean Ethics) for whom ήθος (iēdos ‘one’s character’/ ‘morality’) is acquired through έθος (êdōs ‘habit’/‘custom’).

Unlike consideration and respect (in its restricted sense) which appear to be core concepts in both academic and non-academic discussions of politeness, respect in its broad sense and helping others as components of politeness have rarely been mentioned until recently (see, e.g., Fukushima and Sifianou 2017; Ogiermann and Saloustrou 2020; Ogiermann and Suszczyńska 2011). Even though being helpful underlies the meanings of concepts associated with politeness such as being kind and thoughtful (Travis 1997), it may be that the explicit link between helpfulness and politeness surfaces at times of difficulty such as the financial crisis in Greece or the recent pandemic which bring forward calls for social solidarity. On the other hand, friendliness is a feature frequently found in understandings of politeness and is associated with positive politeness (see, e.g., Armostis and Terkourafí 2019; Culpeper et al. 2019; Pizziconi 2007).
Another interesting issue is that of *authentic* politeness brought up by one poster:

10 [post 26]

I hope in the future we can be more authentically polite -being honest and kind at the same time relating politeness with insincerity. Interestingly, concern as to whether politeness should prevail over sincerity or vice-versa “remains remarkably unchanged through the ages” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2011: 142). However, the relationship between politeness and sincerity has hardly concerned (im)politeness research explicitly (but see Pinto 2011; Xie et al. 2005) even though insincerity emerges as one of the negative aspects of politeness, as previously remarked. There is a common assumption that insincerity is involved in politeness forms (Pinto 2011: 219). In fact, Leech (2014: 6) states that “‘polite’ in contemporary English often conveys the idea of superficial good manners purely as a matter of form” and Brown (2015: 328) contends that “[p]olite utterances are not necessarily communicating ‘real’ feelings about another’s social persona”. Leech (2014) does call politeness “communicative altruism” but clarifies that politeness should not be equated with genuine altruism even though the two may sometimes coincide (Leech 2014: 4; see also Sifianou 1992: 88). Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011: 145) sees the conflict between being sincere and being polite as constant and eternal “since the demands of speaking frankly and speaking politely do not always go well together”.

The poster’s comment (example 10) above and the brief discussion following it reflect the distinction between surface and genuine/deep civility that has been drawn by civility scholars (see, e.g., Boyd 2006; Calhoun 2000). For instance, for Calhoun (2000: 253) surface civility is a mindless compliance with rules whereas genuine civility involves “a critical moral point of view” about what really counts as kindness, respect, tolerance and consideration of others’ feelings.

As can be gleaned from the above, the posters relate politeness to notions that are of concern to (im)politeness researchers (e.g., consideration) but to these they add notions (e.g., respect in its broad sense, tolerance, sincerity) that are of more central interest in related fields outside pragmatics, such as (in)civility studies. Given this, it is noteworthy that there is very little cross-pollination between (in)civility and (im)politeness research (see, e.g., Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár 2021: 392; see also Sifianou 2019).

### 4.3 Verbal and non-verbal aspects of politeness

As regards verbal aspects of politeness, the journalist, drawing on Holtgraves and Whitmore, raises the issue of indirectness, also adding that in the current situation it is important that the message is clear which can be achieved with a verbal or non-
verbal explanation. Interestingly, none of the posters takes up these linguistic issues with the exception of the one poster (34, example 3) mentioned earlier, who rather bluntly disagrees with the need for indirectness.

Posters relate politeness mostly to nonverbal behaviour. Understandably, the main topics that are brought up include handshaking and proxemics but also hugging, kissing along with other mundane acts of courtesy.

Handshaking has various functions (e.g., greeting, congratulating, closing a deal). It is “a sign of access and solidarity” (Schiffrin 1974: 90) but also socioculturally and contextually specific, as in business and politics where it is more a signifier of trust, thus, not necessarily interpreted in terms of politeness. The handshake has been with us for thousands of years. However, for millennia it has also been associated with the transmission of disease. So, some posters would be happy if such forms of touching were abolished for good or replaced with other nonverbal means of greeting. For instance:

11 [post 1]

I do hope hugging goes the way of the dinosaurs.

12 [post 13]

We could always bow as the Japanese do. It seems to be more elegant and germ-free.

One poster self-identifies as a psychologist evaluating veterans and explains that he understands their need for handshake but is worried about the threat involved. Another poster disagrees with the danger involved in handshaking and argues that we should not let fear motivate our actions because then problems will be more serious.

13 [post 23]

There’s nothing wrong with a handshake unless you can now somehow transmit Covid via inunction.

Posters seem to be more unanimous in finding distancing more difficult; in fact, it is seen as the main source from which impoliteness may emerge during the pandemic. For example:

14 [post 5]

Am I the only one who has seen some people and thought they were being rude when they turned away … but then I remembered social distancing
One poster states that

15 [post 15]

Humans have a biological need to touch other humans

a basic human need which is seen as threatened by social distancing or else physical distancing.

Let me note here that in the context of the pandemic social distancing should not be confounded with what sociologists and sociolinguists call social distance even though the two are closely related. According to Merriam-Webster, social distancing is a medical term which refers to “the practice of maintaining a greater than usual physical distance (such as six feet or more) from other people or of avoiding direct contact with people or objects in public places during the outbreak of a contagious disease in order to minimize exposure and reduce the transmission of infection” and “physical distancing” is added as a synonym. In fact, WHO (World Health Organization) recommended the use of the term physical distancing rather than social distancing, since it is physical distance which prevents transmission of germs whereas people should remain socially connected, that is, “in touch” through social media among others.

As Blommaert (2020) contends “[p]hysical closeness has always been extraordinarily meaningful and sensitive in social interaction, a feature with a special moral dimension in addition”. This moral dimension is aptly evident in the pandemic era. Behaviours are not simply evaluated as appropriate or inappropriate since people who cough and sneeze, do not wear face masks, or do not self-isolate when expected are viewed as dangerous and irresponsible and are sometimes rebuked (Blommaert 2020), as hinted at by the poster (5, cited earlier, “We are here to help each other and not condemn those that aren’t understanding”). As many have pointed out, social distancing is not everybody’s privilege. For instance, it does not mean much to people without a home or may mean a lot of different things to those who may experience violence at home and those who have lost their employment. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, the essence of human morality is to take care of one another as we all depend on one another (Tomasello 2018: 72) and social distancing has been proclaimed as a matter of respect and caring for others in addition to safeguarding their safety along with one’s own.

Some posters see impromptu invitations to friends or neighbours passing by as polite acts which are no longer safe and, thus, avoided:

For example talking to friends through the sitting room window rather than inviting them in for a cup of tea like I would usually do!

Another poster (18) talks about the loss of acts of common courtesy such as picking up somebody’s dropped keys, that is, the kinds of behaviour that have been discussed in the politeness literature as attentiveness (e.g., Fukushima 2020).

In a sense, this focus on non-verbal behaviour is understandable since the article was written at a time when distancing and avoidance of haptic behaviour were not only extensively discussed but also imposed. However, one can presume that if politeness was understood as confined to language use, such behaviours would not have surfaced, at least to the same extent, as topics of talk related to (im)politeness. This then indicates that for posters the scope of politeness is broader than just its linguistic manifestations which have hitherto monopolised (im)politeness research interest (see Eelen 2001: iv; Fukushima and Sifianou 2017; Sifianou and Tzanne 2010). Moreover, one could assume that since politeness, and negative politeness in particular, has been closely associated with discursive and spatial distancing, posters would express appreciation for the new measures. Yet, what most posters seem to lament is the loss of proximity and the friendliness and involvement it entails. But is it really positive politeness which is the threat and thus under threat? Not really, because positive politeness is not simply about physical proximity but includes interest and approval of each other’s personality, shared values, and commonality of attitudes, among others (B&L 1987: 101). We should remain physically distant, to prevent the transmission of the virus, but socially connected, through greeting, smiling and hugging at a distance, more frequent online contact, and acts of social solidarity and generosity. As Blommaert (2020) observes, the social distancing imposed to contain the spread of the virus relates only to the offline dimension of social behaviour as it has simultaneously contributed to the immense expansion of online possibilities of social contact. Thus, what the pandemic has disturbed is the embodied co-presence and the material touch, “a fundamental aspect of sociality” (Burdelski et al. 2020). This resonates with the “sensory pragmatics” envisioned by Bargiela-Chiappini (2013) who suggested looking beyond discursive pragmatics by focusing on the links among embodiment, sensation and materiality.

Both posters and the journalist provide personal examples to contextualise their understandings, support their positions, illustrate their feelings, and describe or offer solutions to current dilemmas. The nine personal examples provided constitute

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10 It is fair to note that (im)politeness researchers (e.g., Eelen 2001: iv; Kádár and Haugh 2013: 3; Spencer-Oatey 2005: 97; Watts 2003: 119) concede that politeness is not restricted to language use, yet they offer various justifications for their focus on verbal politeness.
cases of what Hutchby calls “witnessing device”, that is, accounts presented as truthful by virtue of first-hand, experiential knowledge (Hutchby 2008: 237). In addition, posters touch upon other issues I cannot expand on due to space limitations, such as whether politeness is an evolutionary tool for self-preservation or an evolutionary need for social cohesion, the role of emotions, and fear in particular, cultural differences, and the different uptakes between extroverts and introverts. Posters also briefly contemplate the future of politeness in the current situation, which is considered in the next section.

4.4 Contemplating the future of politeness

Posters not only provide theorisation and examples to illustrate their understandings of politeness but also briefly ponder on its future. As noted at the outset, the article and the ensuing comments appeared at the very beginning of the pandemic, so the views expressed should be seen in that context and not in the way the situation has since developed. As one poster writes:

17 [post 2]

I am very concerned about the Post-Pandemic world. I do appreciate the idea that new social norms will rise to replace the old ones. … Your article made me think, but I would be lying if I didn’t admit that the speed of these changes is hard for me.

and another one adds:

18 [post 10]

I’ve been thinking a lot about how our social norms will change!

Posters’ views in relation to non-verbal politeness mostly echo those of the journalist suggesting, for instance, the use of fist or elbow bumps and waving instead of handshaking temporarily or even more permanently. In example 11 above, the poster would be happy if hugging disappeared and in example 12, the poster suggests that we could bow like the Japanese, which is more elegant and germ-free.

It is noteworthy that drawing from her sources, the journalist says that “we’ll become more dependent on language than on physical touch”, a point none of the posters takes up, probably because it was thought rather unlikely to become more dependent on language since physical distance and face masks muffle speech. While it seemed likely and desirable that physical touch would be restricted for some time, at least, it was not speech but rather gaze, gestures and body language in general that was assumed to gain prominence.
In terms of verbal politeness, six posters argue that we should become more assertive but not aggressive. For example:

19 [post 16]

… in those times you need to be assertive, not aggressive.

20 [post 19]

Where you see ‘lack of politeness’, I see ‘being assertive about what I value’. I will always be polite while also being assertive.

This topic was not brought up by the journalist but reflects an issue of wide circulation and discussions in psychology and psychotherapy, which shows clearly that posters draw from various sources of knowledge. Posters clarify though that they will be assertive while also being polite, probably because assertiveness is associated with imperatives and directness and, thus, impoliteness for them. As Cameron (2003: 31) states “[t]he norm of directness … comes from assertiveness training” which is related to the practice of therapy in some communities. In Herstein Cervasio’s (1987: 115) words “assertive speech violates the postulates of politeness and propriety because it advocates expressing negative feelings and making direct refusals”. However, in socially sensitive and high-stakes contexts, such as the pandemic, assertiveness acquires distinct significance even at the expense of the indirectness associated with negative politeness. In this connection, it is of special note that psychologists record assertiveness training as an escape route in high-stakes situations where politeness can have untoward consequences (Bonnefon et al. 2011).

5 Concluding remarks

As stated, my aim in this paper has been to see how non-academics, presumably in some parts of the Western world, understand politeness, how these understandings relate to academic views, the challenges these non-academics notice and experience and the changes they envision as a result of the pandemic. These views are drawn from the user-generated comments an online article triggered. What is of note is that

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11 In fact, one poster (22) states it explicitly saying that “As it happens, I’ve read a few lines the other day about politeness as one of the 27 virtues …”

12 As one reviewer rightly noted, while indirectness has been frequently associated with politeness, this is an anglocentric view as in various cultures directness is not commensurate with impoliteness (see, e.g., Grainger and Mills 2016; Sifianou 1993, 1997, among many others).
despite the limited number of comments, posters raise a variety of issues, some of which constitute areas of (im)politeness research and others which echo more research in sociology, philosophy, psychology and (in)civility studies. Thus, the posters’ reach appears to be broader than what has been the focus of (im)politeness research.

Both the journalist and the commenters appear to understand politeness as consideration for the other and more specifically for the feelings of the other. This is not surprising since for centuries and across societies, a core substance of politeness is “mutually shared forms of consideration for others”, “often at the expense of one’s own interests” (Watts 2003: 31, 35, 50; see also Haugh 2019; Sifianou 1992). Thus, both academics and non-academics appear to share this understanding even though it may not be articulated in the same terms. What the pandemic seems to have challenged is the delicate balance of pursuing one’s own interests, their health in this case, and their being polite. Moreover, the pandemic seems to have motivated a more conscious, critical engagement with the essence of consideration given the speed of changes. One poster (36) expresses this point clearly when s/he writes “I can relate to this because I struggle with it myself. … But I’ve had to convince myself that saving lives is more important right now than being polite or being worried what other people think.” In the context of the pandemic, fear emerges as a chilling emotion conducive to acts that could cause offence and be seen as impolite. For some posters, such as 36 above, politeness could be sacrificed for the sake of safety whereas for others this sacrifice can be avoided through polite assertiveness.

Where (im)politeness researchers and commenters seem to diverge is that the former tend to focus on language use (even though not unexceptionally) whereas the posters’ views are more wide-ranging including a significant non-verbal component along with issues debated in sociology and philosophy, relating to concepts such as respect, virtue, tolerance and authenticity and in psychology relating to that of assertiveness. Some of these broader views resonate with understandings of civility and its links to morality (e.g., Boyd 2006; Calhoun 2000; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár 2021) even though the terms used by posters are polite and politeness rather than civil and civility. So, it appears that in the same way that politeness researchers draw insights from various disciplines, ordinary users of language do the same. They draw from their repository of social and experiential norms but also from various sources of information they have access to, their knowledge and ideologies.

In this connection, it is of note that the journalist draws from scholarly and hyperlinked sources and the commenters in turn draw from the journalist’s views and also add their own. Resembling academic research, one poster refers to an external source to support her claims and another one uses a quotation. Thus, both the journalist and the commenters, presumably non-academics, appear to be informed, reflexive observers and participants in a discursive struggle over what
politeness means and how its essence can be maintained during the pandemic and beyond. Consequently, lay (or non-academic) understandings should not be taken as a uniform entity that can be straightforwardly contrasted to “scientific understandings”; in other words, a clear-cut distinction between first-order and second-order politeness seems untenable at least in this kind of data where interlocutors touch upon or discuss issues related to their understandings of politeness.

What is amply evident in the vast (im)politeness literature and seems to emerge from the posters’ views is that politeness is not simply related to good manners, norms of etiquette and verbal behaviour as many (in)civility researchers (e.g., Bonotti and Zech 2021; Horgan 2021), among others, seem to believe. In other words, politeness is not simply understood by posters as a kind of surface, strategic verbal behaviour, which can sometimes be interpreted as insincere. For them, politeness seems to go deeper than that and involve what could be called genuine or authentic politeness, involving issues related to civility and morality.

Given that both (im)politeness and (in)civility researchers seem to agree that non-academic perceptions of (im)politeness and (in)civility should not be overlooked (e.g., Bonotti and Zech 2021: 186; Smith et al. 2010: 12) but rather constitute a central focus in theoretical discussions (e.g., Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003), I believe that such non-academic understandings of politeness should be more clearly taken on board in academic discussions on both (im)politeness and (in)civility. Despite the conceptual proximity of these terms, it is rather surprising that there is very little interaction between the two fields (see, e.g., Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Kádár 2021) with few exceptions including Lakoff (2005), Mills (2009), Sifianou (2019), and Terkourafi et al. (2018). (In)civility will not “ring many bells with linguists” (Culpeper 2018: 809) and (in)civility researchers either overlook (im)politeness research (e.g., Lane 2017 in Culpeper 2018; Truss 2005) or make claims on the basis of stereotypical understandings or very limited research evidence drawn mostly from Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) (e.g., Bonotti and Zech 2021). Politeness research is necessarily interdisciplinary since politeness is “situated at the intersection of language and social reality” (Eelen 2001: iv). However, what is missing, in my view, is a close synergy between (im)politeness and (in)civility research, a synergy which could enable cross-fertilisation of approaches and analyses and possibly lead to a more comprehensive picture of the complexities of (im)politeness.

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