

Lesson 14

Reading Material

Some discourse analysts have tried to do it (an example is Labov and Fanshel's (1977) study of therapeutic discourse, where they adapt speech act theory to model the interpretation of utterances in a psychotherapeutic setting). Other analysts, however, are more attracted to the idea of general overarching pragmatic *principles*, which language-users apply together with other relevant knowledge to derive interpretations, not by rule but by *inference*. In the next section I examine this alternative approach in more detail.

ACTING ON PRINCIPLE

The originator of the idea of a 'pragmatic principle' is another ordinary language philosopher, H. Paul Grice. In what is probably his best known and most frequently cited essay on this subject, 'Logic and conversation' (1975), Grice proposed that when people interact with one another, a 'co-operative principle' is in force. The principle can be given the following general formulation:

Co-operative principle

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(Grice 1975:45)

More specifically, Grice broke the co-operative principle down into four 'maxims', as follows:

1. **Quantity:** make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. **Quality:** do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. **Relation:** be relevant.
4. **Manner:** avoid obscurity of expression. Avoid ambiguity. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Be orderly.

(adapted from Grice 1975: 45-6)

Even though they are expressed here as imperatives, the co-operative principle and its maxims are not rules which conversationalists are required by authority or social convention to obey. Rather they are principles which it is *rational* and *logical* for people to observe if their goal is to communicate meaning. When we converse, we find it logical to assume that others are using language for a purpose (namely to mean something), rather than simply uttering pointless remarks at random. Unless and

until there is evidence to the contrary, we will try to interpret what others say on the assumption that they are behaving in accordance with our expectations of a rational communicator. When Grice uses the term *co-operative* about conversation, he means it in a special and limited sense – he is talking only about the kind and degree of co-operation that is necessary for people to make sense of one another's contributions. Even exchanges in which the parties are being highly unco-operative in the ordinary sense of that word – a furious argument, a tirade of vulgar abuse, a scenario in which one party refuses to do what the other wants – will be 'co-operative' in the sense that those involved are operating on similar assumptions about communication.

Of course, there are occasions on which people clearly do not observe all of Grice's four maxims – when what they say appears uninformative or over-informative, evasive or irrelevant or obscure or unnecessarily long-winded. Even then, however, we do not immediately conclude that they have abandoned the co-operative principle itself. Rather we consider the possibility that the speaker's 'deviant' behaviour is itself intended to be meaningful; that the speaker is trying to convey something to us by obviously flouting normal expectations regarding quantity, quality, relevance or manner – something s/he cannot or will not say directly, but expects us to *infer*. Grice calls the meaning which is inferred from the fact that a maxim is flouted *implicature*.

As an example, consider the following extract from a journalistic interview with the man who at the time was the leader of the (UK) National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill. The interview took place in the 1980s during a period of strike action by the miners; media coverage had focused on violent clashes between picketing miners and police.

Interviewer: Will you condemn the violence on the picket lines?

Arthur Scargill: I condemn the violence of the police and the National Coal Board.

The journalist asks a question whose form ensures that the most informative, most relevant, least obscure reply would be some variation on 'yes' or 'no'. This presents Arthur Scargill with an unpalatable choice. If he answers yes, he will be heard as condemning the behaviour of his own union members, since they are implicated in 'the violence on the picket lines' – indeed, since they are the actual pickets, they are likely to be held primarily or exclusively responsible for it. If he answers no, however, he risks being heard as actually in favour of picket-line violence. He therefore decides *not* to supply a yes or no answer. Instead he condemns *some* violence – that of the police and of the National Coal Board, the employers with whom the miners are in dispute – but does not mention, either to condemn or to condone, violence on the part of the picketing miners themselves. This answer flouts the maxims of quantity (it is insufficiently informative as an answer to the question) and manner (it is ambiguous). The hearer (in this case, the media audience) is thus alerted to the possibility that Arthur Scargill intends to convey by implicature a meaning he does not actually utter 'on the record'.

What is the meaning Arthur Scargill conveys by providing an obviously under-informative and ambiguous reply to the journalist's question? The simplest inference for listeners to make is that Scargill does not condemn violent actions by striking miners on the picket line: this is the logical explanation of why he cannot simply answer 'yes'. Beyond this, however, the question arises of what else might be implied by his declining to condemn the pickets. One logically possible interpretation is that he denies that the pickets have engaged in violent actions – in which case there is nothing for him to pass judgement on. In fact this is unlikely, since television audiences at the time regularly saw films of violent incidents where miners were plainly not just passive victims. Perhaps, then, Scargill intended listeners to infer that miners did not deserve to be condemned for 'the violence on the picket lines' because even granting that they were involved in it, they were only responding to provocation by their opponents, the police and the employers. Another possible interpretation is that Scargill wanted his audience to infer that whereas he condemned the actions of the police and the National Coal Board, he actually *approved* of violent actions taken by members of his union on picket lines.

Clearly, Arthur Scargill did not actually say any of the three things I have suggested he might be taken by inference to have meant, and the form of his utterance by itself does not tell us which of the possible interpretations we should prefer. Utterances in which maxims are flouted cue us to look for relevant inferences, but the inferences we actually make are dependent on the assumptions and background knowledge we bring to bear on the interpretive task. Thus for instance I have already characterized the interpretation 'Arthur Scargill intends to deny that the pickets have acted violently' as 'unlikely'. In rejecting that interpretation I am making use of both factual knowledge (pickets' involvement in violence was a matter of public record when Scargill was interviewed) and logical assumptions (a rational person does not waste effort trying to communicate propositions he already knows his audience will not believe).

What about the other two possibilities? Here it may well be relevant to consider not only the knowledge available to listeners, but also the differing ideological and political beliefs they may have brought to the interpretation of Arthur Scargill's utterance. In mainstream political discourse, Scargill was frequently represented as a political (left-wing) extremist intent on using an industrial dispute between mineworkers and their employers to pursue his covert goal of fomenting class warfare. Someone who accepted this as an accurate representation might find it reasonable to suppose that Scargill would approve of assaults on police officers by pickets, and might therefore understand his answer to the journalist's question as implying that he applauded the pickets' actions. By contrast, someone who believed in the legitimacy of the miners' cause, and/or was critical of the orthodox view of Scargill, might be less likely to draw that inference, and more likely to understand his utterance as a sort of plea in mitigation: some pickets might have resorted to violence, but they were less worthy of blame than those who provoked them.

This discussion is intended to illustrate one of the advantages that is claimed for the 'pragmatic principles' approach over approaches that attempt to specify rules for getting from the form to the force of utterances: the principles approach is more

accommodating of variation in interpretation, or to put it another way, the existence of such variation is less of a problem in this approach. Gricean pragmatics treats utterances, not as *containing* the speaker's meaning but as providing *evidence* on the basis of which the hearer can work it out. Some of the evidence provided by Arthur Scargill is, of course, in the utterance itself. For instance, his utterance makes clear (and was presumably calculated to make clear) that he does not approve of violence *per se*. But he also provides evidence for meaning in what he does *not* say: his failure to mention the miners explicitly in connection with 'the violence on the picket lines' is what prompts the listener to search for implicatures. That search, however, does not have a single, predetermined meaning as its goal. Since all hearers do not come to the task of drawing inferences with identical assumptions and stocks of background knowledge, their interpretations of an utterance may differ. Nor can it be said that any of their interpretations is the final and definitive interpretation. Implicatures are 'defeasible': they are meanings which the speaker has only implied, not stated explicitly on the record, and consequently the speaker can later deny that what a hearer inferred is what s/he actually meant. Arthur Scargill, for example, could legitimately protest if someone suggested on the basis of the utterance analysed above that he had said it was acceptable for pickets to resort to violence under provocation, though what he did say could be taken to imply that.

It should be noted that not every failure to observe Grice's maxims necessarily gives rise to implicatures. Hearers will only look for implicatures if something prompts them to do so – it has to be obvious that the speaker is flouting a maxim. Clearly, it is possible for people to hold back information or utter untruths without making this obvious. A good liar systematically violates the maxim of quality, but s/he succeeds in deceiving others precisely because they do not realize that the liar is 'saying that which s/he believes to be false'. (Grice distinguished 'flouting' maxims from 'violating' them – flouting is meant to be noticed, violation is meant not to be.) It is also possible for people to utter what seem to be obscure or irrelevant remarks without *intending* to generate implicatures.

Why, it might be asked, do we need the complicated mechanism of implicature when it is perfectly possible just to say what we mean straight out? It is not difficult to appreciate the potential usefulness of a device which allows speakers to communicate propositions without fully committing themselves. A contentious statement made explicitly on the record (e.g. 'violence is acceptable in response to police provocation') is riskier than a veiled statement which leaves hearers to infer the contentious proposition. In the first case the speaker can be held accountable for saying something contentious; in the second case it is open to the speaker to deny that the contentious meaning was intended.

Above I have suggested that speakers who flout Grice's maxims may do so as a strategy for avoiding or reducing the risks associated with saying certain things directly. The idea that communication involves risk, and that communicators behave in certain ways because they wish to minimize risk, has been particularly influential in discussions of another set of pragmatic principles, those associated with *politeness*. One writer, Geoffrey Leech, has suggested that there is a 'politeness principle' which is even more compelling than Grice's co-operative principle: if speakers have to

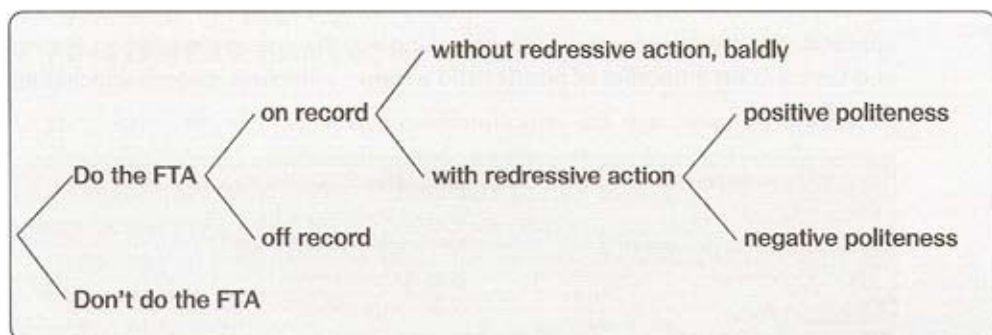
choose between being co-operative (informative, truthful, relevant and perspicuous) and being polite, they will normally choose to be polite (Leech 1983). Thus if I ask someone for an opinion on something I am wearing or something I am writing, and their opinion is unflattering, they may well choose to say something irrelevant, ambiguous or false rather than hurt my feelings by telling me directly what they think.

Not everyone agrees with Leech that there is an independent 'politeness principle', but many pragmaticists would agree that politeness affects the application of the co-operative principle and is therefore an important topic in pragmatics. Probably the best-known account of politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon is given by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), and it is useful to outline their model briefly here.

POLITENESS AND 'FACE'

Brown and Levinson begin from the assumption that all people have an attribute they call 'face'. The term *face* (borrowed by Brown and Levinson from the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman) is used in roughly the same sense as in the English expressions 'to save face' and 'to lose face'. Face is a kind of social standing or esteem which every individual claims for her or himself and wants others to respect. Brown and Levinson distinguish two kinds of face: 'positive face', the wish to be liked and approved of by others, and 'negative face', the wish to be allowed to go about your business without others imposing unduly upon you.

Many of the things people need or want to do in the course of interacting with one another are inherently 'face threatening acts' (FTAs): they have the potential to cause damage to the positive or negative face of the speaker, the hearer, or both. For instance, if you ask someone to do something for you, you are to some extent imposing on them, which is a threat to their negative face. If you criticize someone you are expressing disapproval, which threatens their positive face. If you thank someone or apologize to someone you are threatening your own face, since you are acknowledging that you have imposed on them. Brown and Levinson theorize politeness as a strategy for *mitigating* threats to face in verbal interaction. They offer a sort of 'decision tree' showing the options open to a speaker performing an FTA (1987: 69):



If a speaker perceives some action as face-threatening, the initial choice s/he must make is whether to perform it at all. If you notice that the important client you are meeting for the first time has his flies undone, you may well decide that the least embarrassing course of action is simply to pretend you haven't noticed. If the speaker decides to go ahead with a face threatening act, however, s/he must then choose whether to perform it 'on-record' or 'off-record', that is by implicature. For instance, a dinner guest might remark on the deliciousness of a meal as an 'off-record' strategy for getting the host to offer them more, rather than asking directly (which would be the 'on-record' strategy). The off-record strategy might be chosen in this case by a guest who is worried about appearing greedy, or who fears the host may take a request as a sign that s/he has been negligent in not making the offer unprompted.

If s/he decides to perform the FTA on record, the speaker's next choice is whether to perform it with or without mitigation. Brown and Levinson call the 'no mitigation' strategy 'bald on record': examples include asking someone to move by saying 'move!' or criticizing someone by saying, 'your work is rubbish'. In some circumstances it is rational to be bald – if the roof is about to fall on someone you shout 'move!' rather than casting around for some elaborate and indirect formula to mitigate face threat. A speaker may also, of course, have reasons for choosing to be deliberately impolite. However, in many instances speakers will choose a 'mitigated' way of performing a FTA, opting for a strategy that verbally displays to the hearer that the speaker is aware of the threat and wishes to minimize it – in other words, to be polite. For example, instead of using a bald imperative, a speaker might ask someone to move by saying 'I'm sorry, but I wonder if I could ask you to move over a bit?' This formulation makes clear that the speaker knows s/he is imposing on the other person (this is signalled by the prefatory 'I'm sorry') and it displays the speaker's desire to minimize the imposition through indirectness ('I wonder if I could ask you . . . ?') and hedging ('a bit'). It is a less efficient and straightforward way of expressing what the speaker means than the bald imperative 'move!': in Grice's terms, it is less in keeping with the maxim of manner ('avoid obscurity of expression . . . be brief'). But the clearer and briefer alternative is also highly threatening to the addressee's face: the desire to minimize face threat gives speakers a good reason *not* to choose the most direct and straightforward way of expressing what they mean.

'Politeness' in this model covers more than just fixed formulas like 'please', 'thank you', 'sorry', and so on; rather the term covers all the linguistic devices people may use to minimize threats to face. Just as face itself can be either positive or negative, so can politeness. 'Positive politeness' involves using language to signal liking and approval. Negative politeness involves using language to minimize imposition. Brown and Levinson list a number of positive and negative politeness strategies, including the following:

Positive politeness

Show interest in H
Claim common ground with H
Seek agreement
Give sympathy

Negative politeness

Be conventionally indirect
Minimize imposition on H
Beg forgiveness
Give deference

How do people decide whether and how to use the various strategies in real-life situations? Brown and Levinson suggest that they consider, in particular, three factors: how threatening the FTA they are contemplating is; how much social distance there is between the parties; and what the power relations between the parties are. The first factor, how threatening the act itself is, reflects the obvious point that some impositions are greater than others. A request to someone to pass the salt does not require a lot of elaborate minimization – ‘would you pass the salt, please’ will do. A request to someone to give you a large sum of money, by contrast, is fairly unlikely to be made in the words ‘would you give me £100, please’. But the speaker’s strategy in any case will also depend on the other two calculations, concerning social distance and power. The difference between distance and power is that distance is a symmetrical relationship whereas power is an asymmetrical, hierarchical one. The distance variable distinguishes, for instance, kin or friends from strangers (who may be of equal social status but are still socially distant from one another). We are inclined to perform FTAs differently with those we are socially close to and those we are more distant from. With family and friends we may use less elaborate politeness strategies, or we may use positive rather than negative politeness. We are also inclined to behave differently to our social equals and to people whose status is higher or lower than our own in a given situation (the ‘power’ variable).

Suppose I am trying to work in my office, but I am being disturbed by some people talking loudly in the corridor outside. I open the door intending to impose on these people by asking them to stop doing what they are doing, but what I actually say is likely to be affected by who they turn out to be. If they are a group of students (who in this context have lower status than I do) it is open to me to be minimally polite (‘please could you stop talking, I’m trying to work’) or even rude (‘shut up, will you?’). If they are a group of colleagues (my equals, and people I know) I might do better to use the positive politeness strategy of ‘claiming common ground’ and then framing my request for them to stop disturbing me indirectly, as a question: ‘hey, I’ve got a lecture to write. Is there somewhere else you could talk?’ But if it turns out when I open the office door that the people disturbing me are the Director of the Institute where I work and some VIP guests he is showing round, I may well end up saying nothing, or perhaps even apologizing to *them*: ‘oh, sorry, I heard voices and wondered who it was’. Maybe they will take the hint, but since my status is lower than theirs it would be impolitic for me to do much more than hint.

A POLITENESS PROBLEM: COMPLIMENTS

In this section we will consider a communicative act that poses an interesting challenge in terms of politeness: the act of complimenting someone. Complimenting might seem on the surface to be the *opposite* of a threat to the recipient’s face, but in practice it may present the recipient with a potentially face-threatening interactional dilemma. Suppose, for instance, that A compliments B on her cooking by saying: ‘this is delicious!’ One ‘polite’ response B could make would be to *agree*: ‘yes, isn’t it!’ However, while such agreement would show respect for A’s face, B would run the

risk of appearing immodest (which might threaten her own face, since it would imply she was a 'bad', conceited person). Alternatively, B could present herself more modestly by responding with a self-critical remark, such as 'I'm afraid it's a bit overcooked'. But then she would be disagreeing with A's complimentary assessment, which would risk threatening A's face. One way to resolve the dilemma would be simply to thank A for the compliment, or to say something like 'I'm so glad you like it!' There are other possibilities too, like drawing attention to the superior quality of the ingredients (as opposed to the skills of the cook) or recalling equally delicious meals prepared by some other person – perhaps even A herself – in the past. Compliments are interesting to look at because of the challenge they pose to their recipients. How people manage compliments in practice is the focus of the following activity.

ACTIVITY

Note: your data may be in any language or languages.

- 1 Data collection.** For this activity it is impractical to tape record data: you need to keep a notebook and pen around, and aim to write down as accurately as possible any exchange containing a compliment that occurs in the interactions you witness over a period of several days. Minimally, you should try to record the compliment itself and what, if anything, the recipient said in response to it. You will also need to write down some contextual information (see 2 below). Obviously it is useful to record the data as soon as possible after you hear it, so that your recall of what was said will be reasonably accurate. It is better not to include compliments paid to you or compliments you pay to others, since doing this activity may make you unusually self-conscious about your own complimenting behaviour, but if you have difficulty in collecting examples involving third parties, you may use yourself as an informant. You may also use examples involving people not known to you, whom you overhear by chance, as well as examples involving family, friends and acquaintances. Your sample may not be very large (and for the purposes of this activity its size does not matter): it depends how common compliments are in the social groups and settings you have the opportunity to observe. If you find complimenting behaviour is rare or nonexistent in your everyday social encounters, that in itself is a significant observation! When you compare notes with other students, this may be an interesting issue to explore further (see 4 below).
- 2 Contextual information.** As well as the compliment and the response (if any) you should record who addressed the compliment to whom and what their relationship was (or in the case of people you do not know, appeared to be), in what setting or situation the compliment occurred and (if the speech itself does not make it clear) what the compliment was directed to (e.g. grandmother to 6-year-old granddaughter in grandmother's kitchen; child presents grandmother with a drawing she has done).
- 3 Analysis.** When you have collected a sample of compliments, consider the following questions.

- Was it easy or difficult to decide what utterances to record as compliments? If it was difficult, what made it difficult? Did you observe any 'problem cases' (e.g. did you hear compliments that seemed to you insincere or sarcastic – if so, how did recipients react?).
 - Are there any patterns in who compliments whom (consider variables such as gender, age, social distance and power/status)?
 - Are there any patterns in what compliments are about (e.g. appearance, dress, skill in particular activities like cooking, sport, drawing, academic work), and if so do these relate to the variables considered above?
 - How do compliment recipients respond to compliments? What range of strategies do you find in your sample (e.g. say nothing, thank the complimenter, agree with the complimenter, disagree in order to be modest, praise something/someone else)? Does the choice of strategy seem to be influenced by Brown and Levinson's variables of distance, power, degree of face-threat? Does it seem to be influenced by other considerations (e.g. what the compliment is about, where the exchange occurs)?
- 4 **Discussion.** Compare notes with other students in a group. Did people find similar patterns in their data, or different ones? If there are differences, might they reflect differing conventions of politeness in the different social groups students belong to, or the varying social situations they collected data in?
- 5 **Optional extra.** On the basis of your data, can you formulate a set of rules and felicity conditions (on the model of Searle's rules for promising, see above, page 71) for the speech act of complimenting? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing this?

ARE PRAGMATIC PRINCIPLES UNIVERSAL?

Both the co-operative principle and the principles underlying Brown and Levinson's model of politeness are often presented as applying very generally across cultures and languages. In Brown and Levinson's case the claim that their model has universal application is made explicitly: they recognize, and demonstrate with examples, that politeness itself takes varying forms in different cultures, but they suggest this can be explained with reference to considerations their model treats as variable in any case. For instance, variations in politeness behaviour may arise because different communities make differing judgements about the degree of threat associated with a certain act, or because their social relations are more or less hierarchical or asymmetrical, or because more or less emphasis is placed on social distance. But while the variables may be differently weighted in different cultures, Brown and Levinson assert that the same ones are operative in all; and people's face-wants themselves are fundamentally the same everywhere. Similarly, it has been argued that the co-operative principle captures something about the intrinsic nature of human communication and the reasoning faculty that underpins it. These are strong claims, and they have not gone unchallenged.

One well-known challenge to the universality of the co-operative principle was advanced by Elinor Ochs in a discussion of ways of speaking among the Malagasy

or the status of the speakers can, therefore, influence what methods or techniques they use in conversation, as can the purpose behind the conversation. If Trisha and Dorothea both accept the conventions of this chat show programme, then within these conventions, this is a co-operative conversation.

Politeness

Sometimes, a speaker's role gives them the authority to challenge others as in a teacher-pupil relationship, or as in the conversation between Trisha and Dorothea. Presenting a challenge to someone is difficult. We may want to do something, like offer criticism or refuse to do something, such as comply with a request. Although presenting challenges is difficult, there are ways to present the challenge that are more or less acceptable to the person being challenged. These methods show the need to respect the politeness conventions in our culture.

Brown and Levinson (1978) have studied politeness in widely diverse languages and cultures. They have concluded that, in order to enter into social relationships, all people must acknowledge the face of other people. People have two faces:

- Negative face says 'No one has the right to tell me what to do'
'I do not like to be imposed on'
- Positive face says 'I have my own value systems that I don't want challenged'
'I want my contributions valued and appreciated.'

You challenge someone's face in two ways: either by telling them what to do, which implies you have rights over them, or by showing you disagree with or do not appreciate their values and beliefs. If you challenge someone's face, they will challenge you back! We use politeness with other people so that they will not attack us.

We have to make a choice and provide a balance between getting a message across directly, which might challenge someone, and getting a message across indirectly, which is more polite but sometimes means the message itself is lost.

Negotiation and interaction

Table: Politeness techniques

	What was said	How polite is it?
Direct message – threatens face 	'Shut the door'	Message clear – challenge to negative face could cause offence
	'Please shut the door'	'Please' indicates awareness of politeness but still could cause a reaction as quite blunt
	'Could you shut the window please?'	Command hidden as question – implies listener has some choice! This saves face.
	'Shall we shut the window please?'	Use of personal pronoun 'we' implies we're in the same in-group, have the same values and are doing the task together. This protects someone's positive face.
Indirect message – no threat to face	'It's cold here'	No challenge here! You can always deny wanting anyone to do anything. Message unclear. Response might easily be 'Is it?' or 'Why don't you shut the window then?'

A speaker can also respect a listener's value system and appreciate it by implying membership of the same in-group as the listener. This can be done by the following means:

- ⊗ using the personal pronouns, 'we' and 'us', e.g. 'let's go swimming';
- ⊗ using the same in-group vocabulary, e.g. using dialect or colloquial language when someone else does;
- ⊗ using **psuedo-agreement** which avoids saying 'no' or disagreeing with a speaker, e.g. 'Would you like to come to my house? – Well, I'd love to at another time.'

Robin Lakoff (1973) has summarised politeness in three maxims:

- ⊗ don't impose;
- ⊗ give options;
- ⊗ make your receiver feel good.

Activity

Look at the following utterances and decide how they could either challenge someone's face or protect it:

- 1 If this letter was typed, I'd be very grateful.
- 2 If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I mean, if you don't mind, I'd be grateful if you'd type this letter.
- 3 Do you drink tea? – Yes but I prefer coffee.
- 4 Would you like to come to my house? – Well, I'd love to at another time.
- 5 Shut the door!
- 6 I feel really knackered. – Do you? I must admit I am tired too.
- 7 Could you pass the salt please?
- 8 Let's go swimming!

Commentary

The following table shows us how we choose between a variety of expressions which show varying degrees of politeness and face-saving. The straight command, 'Shut the door', does not respect a person's right to have control over their own body. Direct commands like this are only issued by a superior to an inferior. Giving straight commands like this can, therefore, be rude or patronising.

To avoid this rudeness, politeness factors have been introduced into the language, for example:

- ☉ Please, in 'Shut the door please'.
- ☉ **Hedges**, such as, 'If it isn't too much trouble . . . '.
- ☉ Commands hidden as questions, e.g. 'Could you pass the salt please?'
- ☉ Using provisional language to imply negotiation is possible, e.g. 'if', 'would' and 'can'.

The number of hedges or politeness factors in a request or command is in proportion to the amount that the speaker feels she or he is imposing on the listener. 'If it wouldn't be too much trouble, I mean if you don't mind, I'd be grateful if you'd type this letter', therefore, seems ridiculous because there are too many politeness factors used in relation to the difficulty of the task. Sometimes, to save face, the speaker makes the request as impersonal and indirect as possible, e.g. 'if this letter was typed, I'd be very grateful'.