Politeness in AI-assisted Cross-language Communication

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Politeness in linguistics

- English: *politeness, courtesy, courteousness, civility, good manners*
- Polish: *grzeczność, kurtuazja*
- Traditional linguistics: **intention of a speaker**

(Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987)

- Nowadays linguistics: **perception by an addressee**

(Watts, 2003; Kádár & Haugh, 2013)

One of the most interesting aspects of face and politeness, and their conventional encoding in the patterns of grammar and usage associated with particular kinds of speech acts, is that they differ from culture to culture and from language to language in ways that are difficult to calibrate. This has major consequences for truly felicitous cross-cultural communication. One can be near-native in one's fluency in a foreign language and yet, if one does not have control of the pragmatics of politeness in the language, sound offensively abrupt in one's requests or ludicrously flattering in one's compliments.

Politeness in CEFR

What is sociolinguistic competence?

- Expression of social relations, speech politeness norms, registers, dialects
- Proverbs, sayings, quotes, references to literature, movies, theatre
- Body language (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, body contact, proxemics)

The sociolinguistic component strictly affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence.

(CEFR, 2001, 13)

Being interculturally tactful [...] is a complicated skill that involves much more than simply translating politeness formulas from one language into another.

(Janney – Arndt 2005, 21)

Methods

Aim of the research

- Pragmalinguistic competences of AI → ability to turn a prompt formulated in the speaker's native language into a request in a foreign language
- Varying degrees of politeness → effective spoken communication with native speakers

Methods

- Testing ChatGPT → one of the most widespread and accessible AI tools
- The corpus → 65 initial prompts for various situations (shopping, health service, travelling, etc.)
- Five levels of politeness (very polite → impolite) for each scenario
- Prompts formulated in three native languages (Czech, English, French) → express each communicative situation in the foreign language (e.g., CZ in EN/FR)
- Data set of 390 prompts examined with → grammatical, lexical and pragmalinguistic features

Assumptions

(1) For each prompt → several varieties for different tones of politeness

(2) AI cannot distinguish politeness levels adequately

(3) Reactions in a foreign language will show grammar and lexical errors

(4) The most representative answers will be given for English as a robust language

Findings general: French/English → Czech

- Less options from French then from English prompts (many impolite options)
- English results more creative → sometimes not suitable / new information
- Similar or same phrases across the levels of politeness: especially very polite × polite; polite × polite, but assertive → only difference the word *prosím*
- Impoliteness: informal; influence of the melody; frequently words: *hned*, *okamžitě*, *konečně* + imperativ; no greetings, just interjections *hej*, *hele*
- Not systematically both genders → *Mohl(a) bych poprosit…*
- Very polite and polite → conditional forms × assertive, but polite and assertive → present forms
- Very polite – often phrases: *omlouvám se, že obtěžuji* → sometimes not suitable: *Omlouvám se, že Vás obtěžuji, ale měl jsem nehodu…*
- Literal translation → *mám bolesti zubů* (= *bolí mě zub*)
- Not spoken language → at the end of the request: *Děkuji za pochopení.*
- Possible sarcastic → *Ráda bych si uctivě stěžovala…*; *Proto bych si dovolil(a) požádat o laskavé zvážení ceny…*

Findings: French → Czech

Grammar and lexical errors – most problematic

- Informal (impolite) → *přines účet*; *hej učiteli*; *uvolni místo*
- Wrong / not suitable word → *mohla byste mi nabídnout sedadla*; *konkrétní termín zásahu*
- Grammar errors → *v mé současné pokoji*; *pane/paní profesore*; *informace o jeho zásilce*;
- So-called common Czech → *je tady hrozný vedro*
- Vulgarism → *Kde jsou ty hajzly?*; *Podejte mi sakra vodu!*

Utterances

- Not suitable verb form / phrase → *Chtěl bych si postěžovat…*; *Pusťte mě projít…*
- Repeating instructions → *Jsem na poště a rád bych odeslal balík.*
- Unnatural phrases → *Pane profesore, mám otázku a potřebuji ji vznést.*; *Probudil jsem se pozdě…*

Repeating phrases across the level of politeness

- Mostly very polite and polite
- Less frequent polite, but assertive and assertive
- Rare assertive and impolite → *Dobrý den, potřebuji vědět, kdy máte volné termíny na stěhování…*

Inadequate according to the instruction (too soft × too strong)

- Polite stronger than polite, but assertive → *Nemáte prosím tuto košili v mé velikosti?* × *Potřebovala bych tuto košili v mé velikosti. Můžete se prosím podívat, zda ji máte?*

Findings – English → Czech

Grammar and lexical errors – most problematic

- Informal (impolite) – not so often → *řekni mi;* no vulgarism
- Wrong / not suitable word → *jsem pozdě*; *kdy to konečně pustíte* (delayed train)*?*; *co mám dělat s touhle akné pletí*
- Grammar errors → *Zaplaťte!* (= *Zaplatím*); *paní*/*pane učiteli*; *tohle mléko je špatně; ráda bych poradit…*
- So-called common Czech → *Jsem žíznivej, tak mi něco nalej!*; *Kterej bus jede do zoo?*
- **Positive** → Czech natural phrases → *kdy odjíždějí vlaky směrem na Prahu?*; *ta kopírka mi nejde*; *stane se; jaký střih by mi slušel*

Possible sarcastic in communication with native speaker – more variants than from French

- Verbs → *Dobrý den, ráčil/a byste mi, prosím, poradit s aktuálním odjezdem vlaku?;*
- Phrase → *Doufám, že máte nějaký termín dřív než příští měsíc.*

Inadequate according to the instruction (too soft × too strong) – very problematic

- Assertive, but is impolite → *Prosím, uhněte, vystupuji*.
- Impolite, but is more assertive
- Polite, but assertive – could be polite (or very polite) → *Mohl(a) bych prosím zaplatit?*
- Polite vs. polite, but assertive → *Prosím vás, kde je nádraží?* × *Promiňte, prosím vás, potřebuju se dostat na nádraží. Mohl(a) byste mi říct, kudy mám jít?*

Utterances

- Assumption of feminine gender → shoppings: *Ráda bych si koupila… Mohla byste mi…*
- Not suitable verb form / phrase → *Potřebuji, abyste mi ho uvolnila…* (seat in the theater)
- Making new (inadequate) options → *Potřebuji tuto informaci vyřešit ještě dnes* (lost package)
- Unnatural phrases → *je to špatné zboží, objednal/a jsem omylem*; *Mohl byste dát, prosím, této paní místo? Je jí to potřeba.*

Findings – Czech/English → French

- More options for very common situations where there are more subtle degrees of politeness (e.g., when a train is delayed at the station)
- Same phrases across the levels of politeness: especially VERY POLITE = POLITE; POLITE = POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE, but also in more distant categories, e.g. VERY POLITE = POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE
- The absence of a greeting is repeatedly rated as rude in ChatGPT comments, yet even in polite variants, greetings are often not used
- For the category VERY POLITE, frequent forms with the verbs *déranger* (disturb) and *se permettre* (dare) are used → sometimes inappropriately for the situation (*Si ce n'est pas trop vous déranger, pourriez-vous raccourcir un peu plus ma frange, s'il vous plaît ? = If it's not too much to ask, could you trim my bangs a little shorter, please? ; Bonjour, je me permets de vous appeler pour me renseigner sur les frais de douane. = I dare to call you to ask about customs fees.*)
- Possible sarcastic in communication with native speaker (*Je tiens à vous présenter mes excuses les plus sincères pour mon retard. = I would like to offer my sincere apologies for my delay. ; J'aurais l'honneur de vous signaler un incident concernant un colis que j'ai expédié. = I have the honour of reporting an incident concerning a package I sent. ; Auriez-vous la gentillesse de me vendre un pain sans gluten, s'il vous plaît ? = Would you be so kind as to sell me a gluten-free bread, please?*)

- Formulation is sometimes extended with information that was not included in the prompt (*Bonjour, j'ai mal au ventre et j'ai de la diarrhée. Je ne me sens pas très bien depuis ce matin/depuis hier. Pourriez-vous me conseiller, s'il vous plaît ? Qu'est-ce que vous me recommandez comme médicament ?Auriez-vous quelque chose pour soulager ces symptômes ? Je voudrais quelque chose sans ordonnance, s'il vous plaît. Est-ce que je dois faire attention à quelque chose en particulier ? Merci beaucoup pour votre aide.)*
- French and Czech mixed in one sentence (*Je ne peux pas čekat — řekněte mi, kdy mě můžete vzít.)*

Lexicon

- Typical vocabulary for the categories ASSERTIVE (*clairement, précisément, exactement, directement, immédiatement)* and IMPOLITE (*tout de suite*, *immédiat, rapidement, maintenant, vite*)
- Category IMPOLITE often contains interjections (*voilà, hé, bon, ben)*
- The expressions for the IMPOLITE category were formulated only after repeated requests, and a wide range of options is offered, from vulgar and informal to neutral and polite (*Où sont les chiottes* [VULGAR] *? = Where's the bathroom* [VULGAR] *? > On peut avoir l'addition ou pas ? = Can we get the bill or not? > Les départs pour Prague, s'il vous plaît. = Departures for Prague, please.*)
- IMPOLITE variants are often associated with waiting (*J'espère que ça n'ira pas encore des semaines. = I hope it won't take weeks again. ; J'ai besoin d'un rendez-vous maintenant, pas dans un mois. = I need an appointment now, not in a month.)*
- Wrong collocations (*renseignements académiques, je souffre d'une douleur dentaire importante*)
- Colloquial French (*zapper ; bousillé ; bâclé ; truc ; bordel ; péter ; ouais ; ce fichu livre; un mal de chien ; Y a pas ma taille, là ?)*
- Vulgarism (*chiottes)*

Grammar/language form

- Modal verbs systematically by category: conditional forms—VERY POLITE and POLITE (*Je souhaiterais obtenir un remboursement. = I would like to get a refund.*) → present forms—ASSERTIVE (*Je souhaite être remboursé. = I want a refund.)* → imperative forms—IMPOLITE (*Aidez-moi. = Help me.*)
- Not systematically both genders: *je suis un peu confus(e) ; bonjour, madame/monsieur*
- Written language (*je vous remercie par avance de votre assistance ; Madame, je vous prie de bien vouloir m'aider à faire une photocopie ; Je reste à votre disposition pour toute information complémentaire.*)

Pragmatics

- Illogical response (*Bonjour, je réserve une table pour vendredi à 17 heures. À quel nom souhaitez-vous l'inscrire ? = Hello, I'm reserving a table for Friday at 5 p.m. Under what name would you like to put it?*)
- Rarely informal form of address in the IMPOLITE category (*Tu peux me dire où est la salle d'examen ou pas ? = Can you* [INFORMAL] *tell me where the exam room is or not?*)

Findings: Czech → English

Modal verbs

- *could you* × *can you* not differentiated (VERY POLITE + POLITE)

Sentence types

- VERY POLITE/POLITE often in the form of questions (*Could you please recommend some interesting places to visit?*), imperative frequent with IMPOLITE (*Tell me which bus goes to the zoo.*)
- imperative for assertiveness (*Hi, I'm going to the zoo. Please tell me which bus I should take.*)
- indicative: describing instead of requests (*Excuse me, I need some assistance with the size and fit, if you don't mind.*$_{[POL_BUT_ASSERT]}$)
- in IMPOLITE scenarios, describing situation > imperative (*I'm here for the entrance exam—tell me where the classroom is.*)
- interrogative expressing complaint, impatience (*Do you have a table Friday at 5 or not?*$_{[IMPOL]}$ *Any idea if my train's ever coming?*$_{[IMPOL]}$)
- generally, a sentence type ≠ a communicative situation
- unnatural questions: *Where's the water?*$_{[IMPOL]}$ asking for a drink in the house of my friend's parents

Findings: Czech → English

Lexicon

- modal adverbs: *Could I possibly ask for your help with making a photocopy, please?* [VERY_POL]
- block language for IMPOLITE: *Hey, you! Train station? / Student discount card. Where?*
- expressivity for IMPOLITE: *This is disgusting! What the hell is this? There's a dead fly in my meal! / You should have more sizes. This is ridiculous.*
- interjection *hey*: mostly impolite; *Hey, could I use your bathroom?* [ASSERT] "casual, friendly manner, appropriate in informal settings"
- broad scope of *I need* (POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE ↔ IMPOLITE): *Hello, this is XY. I need to schedule a pre-employment medical examination* ("polite, but purposeful") × *I need help with a library card* ("not impolite on its own, but sounds unfriendly and insensitive without more context")

Lexicon & style

- highly formal connotations for VERY POLITE: *Good afternoon. I'm a university student, and I'd like to inquire about obtaining a student discount card for train travel. Could you please tell me what the procedure is?*
- inadequate in spoken discourse

Findings: Czech → English

Pragmatics

- *please* for VERY POLITE ↔ ASSERTIVE
- apologies for VERY POLITE ↔ POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE: *excuse me*; *Sorry to bother you, but could I use your restroom?*
- irony (occasional): *Great, another delay. Any idea if my train's ever coming?* [IMPOL]
- interchangeable greetings *Good morning/afternoon*, *Hello*; *Hi* considered POLITE ↔ ASSERTIVE, but differs according to settings (+ addressing a shop assistant, – booking a table); greetings ignored in the IMPOLITE situations
- hedges and addressee-oriented utterances: *We're ready whenever you are for the check, please. Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you . . . I'd really appreciate your help with the size and fit, if you have a moment*.
- iconic principle—more form = more meaning: *Good afternoon, I was wondering if I could reserve a table. Hello, I'm sorry to bother you, but could you please tell me when my train is now expected to arrive? Excuse me, I'm terribly sorry, but I just noticed there's a dead fly in my meal.*

Findings: Czech → English

Across politeness levels

- for some prompts, AI can differentiate the nuances:

  VERY POLITE *Good afternoon. I bought this sweater today, and I've just realized there's a small tear in it. I was wondering if I could please get a refund.*

  POLITE *Excuse me, I bought this sweater today, and I've just noticed it's torn in one place. Could I please get a refund?*

  POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE *Hello, I purchased this sweater earlier today, and I've just realized it's torn. Since it's damaged, I'd like a refund, please.*

Findings: Czech → English

Across politeness levels

- prevailing tendency: just moderate ability to differentiate the politeness levels: identical sentences, minor lexical differences (greetings), ignoring social distance (addressing a friend × addressing his parents)
- *Excuse me, I really like this shirt, but I can't find my size. Could you please check if you have it?* [V_POL] / . . . *if you have it in stock?* [ASSERT]
- same sentence—different metalinguistic commentary: *Could I please have a glass of water?* (a) VERY POLITE "natural, elegant, common in polite conversation" (b) POLITE "balanced, polite, but self-confident" (c) ASSERTIVE "direct, friendly, self-confident, but not impolite"
- problems of adequacy: IMPOLITE *This book is in the catalogue, but it's not on the shelf. Can you find it for me?* "blunt, impatient, haughty" > consdering L2 speaker's competences, other varieties can be overcomplicated both syntactically and lexically

Findings: French → English

Contrasting CS → EN / FR → EN

- **face-threatening strategies**
  - equivalents from CS often express complaints: *My place is flooding because of a burst pipe—I've been waiting long enough!* / *The water's pouring everywhere and nobody's here yet! What's taking so long?*
  - source FR accentuates impatience (*Where's the bathroom? I need it now*.) or employs irony (*Hey, there's a dead fly in my dish. Just take it back and bring me something edible*.)
  - FR less aggressive: *Can you finally bring the bill?* / *We've been waiting. Bring the check.* × CS *Hey, can I get the check? I've been waiting forever for the bill!*
- **nature of AI's responses**
  - usually 1 reaction per 1 level of politeness
  - briefer utterances: source CS *Hello, I'm sorry to bother you, but could you please tell me when my train is now expected to arrive?* × source FR *Excuse me, could you please tell me the expected arrival time of my train? Thank you very much.* [V_POL]
  - more oriented to a non-native speaker?

Findings: French → English

- exaggerated politeness: *Whenever you get a chance, may we have the bill, please?* [V_POL] *Excuse me, I hope I'm not bothering you. I'm looking for some information about studies and I was wondering if you could kindly direct me to the International Relations Office, please?*
- suggesting the reactions which are only implied in the initial prompt: *Hi, I'd like to book a table for Friday at 5 PM. Please let me know if that works.* [POL] / *Could you confirm the booking?* [POL_ASSERT] / *Please confirm.* [ASSERT]

Findings – general

- AI tends to anticipate and add new information not given explicitly in the prompt
- similar/almost identical reactions across more level of politeness (VERY POLITE ↔ ASSERTIVE)
- sometime fails to recognize spoken discourse, offering too formal varieties typical in a written mode
- iconic principle more form = more meaning (in VERY POLITE responses)
- apologies (sorry, excuse me) for VERY POLITE ↔ POLITE, BUT ASSERTIVE varieties
- interjections in IMPOLITE responses
- unintentional irony or sarcasm
- IMPOLITE attitude associated with impatience, complaints

Conclusions

(1) For each prompt → several varieties for different tones of politeness

confirmed in EN and CS; less varieties in French

(2) AI cannot distinguish politeness levels adequately

some responses well nuanced, but the strong tendency to similar or almost identical responses across different levels of politeness

(3) Reactions in a foreign language will show grammar and lexical errors

absent in EN

evidence in CS: inapropriate style (substandard varietes, non-idiomatic equvialents), morpho-syntactic erros (concord, personal pronouns)

wrong collocations in FR, confusing languages (*Je ne peux pas čekat — řekněte mi, kdy mě můžete vzít.*)

(4) The most representative answers will be given for English as a robust language

EN offers the broades set of options also as the source language

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Thank you for your attention.
Děkujeme za pozornost.
Merci de votre attention.