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## **How can ethnography contribute to understanding (im)politeness?**

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**Abstract:** This article presents an invitation to explore the benefits of adopting an ethnographic approach to (im)politeness research rather than an introduction to, or overview of, a well-established method in anthropology. It unfolds in four parts. In the first, I discuss some of the different ways in which (im)politeness scholars have grappled to reconcile lay and analyst understandings of (im)politeness with varying degrees of success. In the second, I offer the background of two examples which were gathered as part of ethnographic fieldwork in a contemporary migratory context. The examples deal with two classic topics in (im)politeness research: greetings and indirectness. The analysis demonstrates how insights from ethnography can enrich (im)politeness analysis by helping us to close the gap between lay and theoretical understandings of the practice. In the final section, I address the importance of delimiting the value of (im)politeness practices in the social reality of the speakers under study and invite colleagues to reflect on the societal impact of the discipline, including the expansion of the discipline beyond its middle-class milieu.

**Keywords:** greetings, indirectness, sociality, high-order, Latin Americans

## **1 Introduction**

Over the last two decades, scholars of (im)politeness have been grappling with the problem of trying to establish the extent to which the analyst's understanding of (im)politeness in a particular context coincides with the understanding of the practice made by the participants themselves (e.g., "politeness1" and "politeness2" [Eelen 2001]). A related problem for (im)politeness scholars is the degree to which the participants under study concur or not in their understanding of the practice they engaged in as polite or impolite. In the course of this paper I explore how insights from the ethnography might enrich politeness analysis, especially with regards to the participants' understanding. This is because ethnographic research draws upon the observations from the insiders' viewpoint to help to interpret phenomena while seeking to understand the differences between an insider's perspective and that of an outsider. In this sense, its objectives are closely aligned to those of the (im)politeness enterprise. The insights that I hope the reader will gain upon reading this paper are based on two illustrative examples gathered through observation. The examples deal with two classic topics of (im)politeness research: the presence and functions of greetings and indirectness in the context of for-profit service encounters.

The analytic dilemma of reconciling theoretical and lay understandings of observed practices is not unique to the field of (im)politeness but pervades many areas of scholarship. Theoretical understandings of a given social practice, in the case of this article of (im)politeness, should enable us to understand its *raison d' être* and organizing principles. It should also allow us to make predictions about polite and impolite behaviour. However, these theoretical concepts and their operationalization are not necessarily understood in the same way by individuals or communities when trying to explain why and how certain behaviours are considered to be (im)polite. Nor are lay concepts always shared among members of a social group in a particular context or by folk in general.

As a site intensive method, ethnography involves direct and sustained observation of the practices of a given social group in the context of their daily lives. It provides us with a holistic and emic approach capable of illuminating the norms that underlie the (im)politeness practices that members of a given social group engage in. Moreover, systematic contact over time can facilitate the tracking and identification of changes in the social expectations that members of the group orient to as (not) observed. An ethnographic perspective should thus help the (im)politeness analyst to shed light on some of its ongoing analytic challenges, such as integrating lay and analytic stances and extending its analytic scope.

In line with the aim of this special issue to explore alternative approaches to (im)politeness research, in this paper I propose that the incorporation of an ethnographic perspective to (im)politeness research can elucidate important historical and contextual factors in the interpretations of (im)politeness that interactional participants orient to. An ethnographically informed approach offers knowledge about the relational history between participants in a social group and the set of social expectations that its members use or invoke to construct the everyday activities that scholars of (im)politeness home in on. Both (im)politeness and ethnography seek to examine (the appropriacy of) the cultural practices of given social groups. They attempt to understand the way members of a social group, rather than the analyst, perform and interpret (im)politeness by way of understanding the social conventions on which it is based. In other words, they both seek to understand cultural meaning. However, the primary focus of (im)politeness studies has been on the activities that participants of a given social group engage in, with few sufficiently detailed descriptions of the situated perspective on interaction provided by ethnography. And, minimum relational engagement from the researcher. Reflexive knowledge gained through engagement coupled with contextual and situated detail beyond the interaction itself, allow for the identification of the, often tacit, norms that participants orient to on the basis of iterative observations across

communicative settings. This knowledge, in turn, can enrich the (im)politeness scholar's understanding of the practices that members of a given social group orient to as (im)polite and the potential basis of it.

The structure of this article is as follows. In the next section (section 2), I discuss some of the different ways in which (im)politeness scholars have attempted to integrate lay and analyst understandings of (im)politeness. In the second (section 3), I offer the background of the two examples analyzed in this paper including the methodology adopted to collect them. This is then followed by the analysis (section 4) before I present concluding remarks in the final section of the paper.

## **2 Towards closing the gap between analyst and lay understandings of (im)politeness**

Since its inception in the late 1970s and 1980s, the field of politeness has undergone various theoretical and methodological changes. The first set of studies sought to understand the cultural perspective in politeness by examining different lingua-cultures according to universal frameworks (Brown and Levinson 1987; Leech 1983). They mainly focused on speakers' realization of speech acts on the basis of analyses of elicited data (e.g., discourse completion tests). These were then subjected to cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) and cultural orientations to politeness identified, inevitably resulting in subsequent culture-specific critiques.

The universalist perspective of these studies and its macro orientation led the way to research on discourse in primarily naturalistic interactions (e.g., Watts 2003) with a specific focus on speakers' evaluative moments of each other's politeness behaviour, including the extent to which politeness was intended by the speaker especially in light of the hearer's uptake (see, for example, Sbisà [2009] on uptake as evidence of illocutionary act

conventionalization rather than intentionality). This left the politeness scholars with an epistemological dilemma of accounting for individuals' shared understandings of (im)politeness across languages and cultures. (Im)politeness scholars thus tried to resolve this problem by deploying a variety of methods to make sense of participants' understandings within and outside the interactional setting examined.

The field was thus cross-pollinated with analytic tools and methods from associated disciplines such as “next-turn proof procedure” (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1998) from Conversation Analysis (e.g., Arundale 1999; Márquez Reiter 2006, 2009; Kádár and Haugh 2013; Haugh 2015). This enabled analysts to capture participants' understanding of (im)politeness by way of their “reactions”, and to consider how a given action could be heard as (im)polite rather than something else. It also allowed for the identification of (im)politeness without solely relying on the analyst's idiosyncratic reading as it incorporated the participants' observable readings in the interaction itself. As useful as these analyses are, their primarily micro interactional orientation prevented them from shedding light on the cultural meanings that may be shared by members of a given social group across settings or render possible the comparability of the results with those in other lingua-cultural settings. Other studies thus resorted to adding further validity to the analytic claims by checking the linguistic formulation of an action which was oriented to as (im)polite by participants of a given language in a given communicative setting against an established language corpus (e.g., Haugh and Culpeper 2018). This was shown to be helpful in establishing the frequency and collocation of a given (im)polite token in the same basic language as that spoken by the participants. It presented the analyst with potential pointers for its social valorization.

The combination of others' methods, in particular, elements from corpus linguistics, brought back the macro aspect into the equation but, arguably, introduced another problem. The identification of linguistic expressions in a corpus of the same basic language as that

spoken by interactional participants in a different context can be useful in establishing the general incidence and collocations of indexicals of (im)politeness such as racial slurs, to cite one example. However, it implicitly assumes that the language used by the participants is a more or less stable system (Vološinov 1973). In other words, it can leave little room to account for the ordinariness of heteroglossic practices (Bakhtin 1981) and the way participants do identity work (e.g., Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985), as illustrated in example 1, below.

Concurrently, digital communication (e.g., Graham and Hardaker 2017) in traditional media (online newspapers, televised interactions), contemporary social media as well as post-performance interviews have complemented (im)politeness analyses. These have aided the examination of the interactional participants' emic reactions to occurrences of (im)politeness. In these studies, metapragmatic commentaries obtained are typically used as means to shine light on the politeness ideologies that inform participants' behaviour by way of evaluations. However, post-performance interviews and online comments are also situated interactions of a different kind. They represent meta-discursive assessments of self or other (past) behaviour while attending to the maintenance of participants' self-presentational needs vis-à-vis others – the interviewer (Márquez Reiter 2018) and other (potential) Web 2.0 participants – in the interaction in which they are engaged. In addition, these reflective exchanges may constitute a vehicle for remedial action (Goffman 1967) or (public) denunciation (Garfinkel 1956; Márquez Reiter and Haugh 2019) resulting from perceptions of (im)politeness that may have accumulated across the relational history between the participants, irrespective of how short it may be. The participants may avail themselves of these post performance platforms to justify their own past or current behaviour and present that of an alleged wrongdoer as inexcusable. Arguably, therefore, the data obtained by the analyst may be more aptly described as accounting practices triggered by orientations to (im)politeness, albeit in another setting. In

addition, the technical and social contingencies of the communicative setting in which these reflections occur (e.g., the affordance of the media and the audience) needs to be analytically calibrated.

Despite their clear merit in helping the analyst to fine-tune analytic determinations, it is important to bear in mind that there is not a one-to-one relation between reflective comments and the (im)politeness phenomena first observed. This is because the analyst asks the participants to remark on prior practices and then uses reflective commentary elicited in a situated communicative arena to account for politeness practices observed in a different setting. In this way, metapragmatic accounts of (im)politeness practices are captured but their everydayness inevitably escapes the analyst's attention. Indeed, the interactional affordances and usability of feedback interviews and commentary on the social web provides participants with a different situated context from the one the participants under study first participated in. In this sense, the views participants articulate in these activities do not always coincide with the reactions to (im)politeness they originally oriented to in a different interaction or setting.

In readjusting the analytic lens to the relational practices of the group, an ethnographically informed approach can help us to shine light on how members of a group differentiate their ways of talking and relate to one another across the different types of settings they participate in. This, in turn, can contribute to our understanding of (im)politeness behaviour that cannot be fully analyzed by primarily dyadic-based frameworks, despite the Web 2.0 contexts that have recently received attention as a result of the ease with which publicly available digital data can be obtained.

In this paper I will demonstrate the analytic benefits of combining an ethnographic perspective on the basis of two examples gathered from fieldwork conducted in two migrant Latin American enclaves in London. The examples in question deal with two areas that have received significant scholarly attention in politeness research: greetings as access rituals and



indirectness in the contexts of service encounters. The analysis will show the importance of ethnographic knowledge to better understand the larger contextual conditions in which the encounters we capture are embedded. The way in which this knowledge allows us to shy away from seeing interactional participants as belonging to generally conceived homogeneous social groups whose practices are more or less fixed in time (by virtue of their speaking a language in a given physically defined setting). Further, the migratory setting examined provides us with the opportunity to appreciate the transactional order at which (im)politeness becomes relevant (Márquez Reiter and Kádár in press), and to reflect as scholars on whether (im)politeness research should be oriented towards societal impact by, among others, reporting the voices of the under-represented that we rarely focus on.

Before turning our attention to their analysis, I offer a discussion of the two Latin American enclaves in London where the examples were gathered, as well as a general profile of Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in the city, and the livelihood needs that bring them together. This is then followed by the analysis of examples where I combine politeness analysis with ethnographic information gathered at these sites. Finally, I offer some conclusions.

### **3 Background and methods**

One of the key elements of ethnography is to study at first hand what people do and say in given settings. This entails conducting observation in these contexts for a relatively lengthy period of time,<sup>1</sup> carrying out open-ended interviews with a view to understanding people's

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that there are discrepancies regarding how long an ethnography should take. This should not come as a surprise, given its anthropological origins (e.g., Malinowski 1922). Within anthropology, ethnographers tend to live among members of the community under study for years to observe the behaviour of those under study, including their own, across a variety of settings. Sociologists who use ethnography as a method, on the other hand, tend to focus on face-to-face everyday interactions in specific locations as portraits of the 'social worlds' experienced by the subjects (i.e., Chicago School). They more often study groups of people within commuting distance of home and academic work. So, this does not generally involve the isolation

perspectives on the social activities we observe, and collecting documentary evidence, such as gathering texts, images and the like. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:1):

In its most characteristic form...[ethnography] involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research.

An important dimension of ethnography is the understanding that in engaging in social activities, participants are 'contexting' those activities and signalling to one another what may or may not be relevant (cf. conversation analysis). In addition, these social activities can only be fully understood by reference to the wider society in which they take place. In this sense, therefore, ethnography allows us to view micro and macro aspects of interaction (moments of social interaction and broader social issues) as a whole rather than sustain an analytic distinction between them when this may not be empirically demonstrable.

The illustrative examples examined in this article form part of a corpus of approximately 60 hours of observations (Spradley 1980) conducted during peak and slow hours in the shops in and around the Elephant & Castle shopping centre and the Seven Sisters Indoor Market in London (see images 1–3 below) between April 2013 and September 2015, 26 life-story interviews with Latin American retailers and regular visitors, as well as the gathering of documentary evidence (newspapers, flyers, photographs). Latin American migrants rely on these spaces to connect with their homeland and to facilitate social interaction in the city given their (ir)regular status and the inability of some of them, especially many recent arrivals, to speak English or access 'good value for money' English lessons in order to obtain employment in the receiving country and gain mobility.

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of remote locations. And, qualitative sociolinguists, typically engage in what is now known as linguistic ethnography (e.g., Rampton 2007). They engage in, primarily though not exclusively, longitudinal analyses in educational contexts (e.g., 2 or 3 visits week over the course of an academic year).

**Image 1: The Elephant & Castle shopping centre**

[INSERT IMAGE 1]

[INSERT IMAGE 2]

**Image 2: Range of products and services on offer** – from fashion items, legal services, translation and interpreting services, property investment and money exchange in Colombia to Colombian coffee. – 23/10/2013

[INSERT IMAGE 3]

**Image 3: The Seven Sisters Indoor Market and some of the shops therein above, and a landscape view of the Market and surrounding shops with the Parador Rojo, the largest eatery, to the left of the Market entrance** – 5/4/2013

I visited the two shopping centres and surrounding areas on frequent occasions as a Latin American customer, albeit what some may regard as an “elite” Latin American migrant by virtue of my occupation and physical appearance. My visits also took place on weekends when the sites are at their busiest. This entailed hanging around, observing and taking notes of the activities that Latin Americans engaged in at the sites (i.e., watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions) as well as the general profile of those who regularly visit them by speaking to people informally, and identifying and interviewing key

participants (i.e., major participants that the analyst relies on for validation of the data). The observations made, informal questions asked and documentary data gathered, informed the life-story interviews (Atkinson 1998). Table 1, below, illustrates the database from which the two examples discussed in this paper were taken.

<b>Observation diary– fieldnotes</b>	<b>Life-story interviews</b>	<b>Documentary evidence</b>
12–15/4/2013, – <i>Parador Rojo</i> , Seven Sisters – file 1	Juan; Luisa – 14/4/2013 Seven Sisters	<i>Latin News; Express News; El Ibérico; Voz Latina</i> – 4/2013–12/2014, digitized folder 1
13/5/2013– <i>La Bodeguita</i> , Elephant & Castle – file 2	Angela; Pedro – 13/5/2013, Elephant & Castle	Flyers and offers – 4/2013–12/2014– digitized folder 2
2/7/2013, 14/7/2013 – <i>Tiendas del Sur</i> , Elephant & Castle- files 2 and 3	Johan; Lucinda; Lourdes – 14/7/2013, Elephant & Castle	Photographs – folder 3
8/9/2013, 22/9/2013 – <i>La Juguería</i> , Seven Sisters, file 4	Blankita; Juan Pedro; Alba – 21/9/2013, Seven Sisters	
15/11/2013, 16/11/2013 – <i>Asesoría Legal</i> , Seven Sisters, file 5	Carmelita; Amparo; Walter, 14/11/2013, Seven Sisters	
4/2/2014, 5/2/2014 – <i>The Arches</i> , Elephant & Castle, file 6	Rico Pato; Fernando – 5/2/2014, Elephant & Castle	
16/4/2014, 17/4/2014 – <i>Carnicería de María</i> , Seven Sisters, file 7	Doña María y marido – 17/4/2014, Seven Sisters	
20/7/2014 – <i>Costurería</i> , Elephant & Castle, file 8	Claudia – 20/7/2014, Elephant & Castle	
3/9/2014, 4/9/2014 – <i>Peluquería</i> , Seven Sisters, file 9	Patricia; Gema – 5/9/2014, Seven Sisters	
24/12/2014 – <i>Fiesta de Navidad</i> , Seven Sisters, file 10	Abuelitas – 24/12/2014, Seven Sisters	
2/2/2015, 4/2/2015 – <i>Fajas</i> , Seven Sisters, file 11	Rosa María – 3/2/2015, Seven Sisters	

30/4/2015– <i>Tienda de re-mix</i> , Elephant & Castle, file 12	Cientes, 30/4/2015, Elephant & Castle
3/7/2015– <i>Lo del Tigre</i> , Seven Sisters, file 13	
22/12/2015, 23/12/2015 – <i>Money exchange</i> , Seven Sisters, file 14	Dueño; Cliente, 23/12/2015

**Table 1: Database – fieldwork April 2013-September 2015**

Almost 250,000 Latin Americans live in the UK with more than half of them in London (145,000).<sup>2</sup> Over a third of Latin Americans are Brazilian, followed by Colombians who constitute the largest Spanish-speaking national group with circa 30,000 members (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016). The high presence of Colombians is observed in the above images (e.g., ethnic banners such as the presence of the Colombian flag, Colombian coffee, property investment in Colombia, etc.). Latin Americans are largely trapped in segregated workplaces working for co-ethnics under conditions of precarity (Butler 2012) (e.g., cleaning and catering) where English is not, strictly speaking, a necessary resource (e.g., Goldstein 1997) for sustaining a livelihood in the city. The vast majority of Latin Americans in London have arrived since 2000 for principally economic reasons. The economic crisis of 2008 resulted in the onward migration of Latin Americans from mainland Europe, mainly from Spain, thus increasing the diversity of the group regarding the types of Spanish-speaking people and their ethnic mix (Márquez Reiter and Patiño-Santos 2017) while adding to intra-ethnic tensions arising from the rescinding of local resources. Onward Latin Americans from Europe were, prior to Brexit, entitled to live and work in the UK and to access local Council help with housing, among others. However, they faced similar challenges to relatively recent arrivals from Latin America in terms of accessing English language courses given steep governmental cuts in ESOL provision. Onward Latin American-migrants were thus seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish is one of the languages spoken by Latin Americans. It constitutes one of the top 10 other languages spoken in London (UK Census 2011). Latin Americans are one of the UK's fastest growing groups.

competing for jobs within the co-ethnic niche economy in which Latin Americans are mainly inserted.

In view of this, it should be evident by now that Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in London constitute a diverse social group in terms of the cultural background of its members who hail from diverse parts of the subcontinent or from different regions and dialect zones within the same country. In addition, their motivations for migrating to London vary from the political unrest that characterized the region in the 80s and 90s, to voluntary migration as result of economic prerogatives, including onward migration within Europe following economic crises, especially Spain's economic downfall in 2008.

The analysis of the examples thus takes into account the larger context in which the observed exchanges took place. In line with research on (im)politeness, this includes the specificities of the communicative setting, namely the enactment of (service) encounters between participants in a given language in the context of two migrant enclaves. In addition, it considers shifts in the setting by way of the migration trajectory, participants' length of residence in the receiving society, as well as changes in the structural conditions in the receiving society (such as cuts in ESOL provision and the increasing gentrification of poor parts of the city where migrant enclaves are usually established). And, how these, in turn, affect the motivation behind the goal-oriented encounters observed and the way in which they are enacted. It will thus allow us to question the extent to which traditional approaches to (im)politeness research such as the recording of face-to-face or mediated interactions (e.g., in social media) and their checking against language patterns in a given basic language (in this case Spanish) are capable of capturing the form, function and, above all, value of the politeness practices observed among members of this social group.

## 4 Analysis

The analysis will focus on two examples collected at the above enclaves. The examples in question deal with two classic areas within politeness research: the presence of greetings as access rituals (Goffman 1967) and matters of indirectness, respectively. The latter in particular has received significant attention in politeness research given the once-held understanding that there was a one-to-one relation between indirectness and politeness whereby indirect utterances would be seen as polite and direct ones as lacking in politeness expectations (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1990; Márquez Reiter 2002). I will show why and how ethnographic knowledge can help us interpret the presence and value of politeness practices therein.

### 4.1 On how to begin. Marked greetings in goal-oriented encounters.

As mentioned in section 2, in 2013 I started conducting ethnographic fieldwork among Latin American migrants in London. The bulk of this work entailed carrying out observations, collecting documentary evidence and conducting interviews in Latin American enclaves, with special attention to the performance of service encounters in the then two major spaces of *Latinidad* in London: The Elephant & Castle shopping centre and the Seven Sisters Indoor Market. Example 1, below, was taken from fieldnotes conducted during observations at one of the largest eateries at the Seven Sisters Indoor Market.

Example 1 – *Parador Rojo* – Seven Sisters – fieldnotes 10/4/2013

While standing by the counter of the *Parador Rojo* eatery and talking with the cook as he was preparing the dishes, a man in his late twenties approaches the counter and addresses him

1. Man: *Muy buenos días caballero ilustré*
2. Cook: *Mmm?*

3. Man: *quihubo?*
4. Cook: (silence)
5. Man: *Necesitás a alguien que te de un mano en la cocina?*
6. Cook: *pues no mijo, a nadie y tenés que hablar con el dueño*
7. Man: *gracias entonces*

### Translation<sup>3</sup>

1. Man: Good morning honourable gentleman
2. Cook: Mmm?
3. Man: hello?
4. Cook: (silence)
5. Man: Do you<sup>V</sup> need someone to give you<sup>T</sup> a hand in the kitchen?
6. Cook: well no son, nobody and you<sup>V</sup> need to talk to the owner
7. Man: thank you then

Following this, the enquirer proceeded to sit at a table where two other men were seated. I approached the table with a view to conducting an interview with him.

8. Me: *Buenos días, perdonen la molestia*
9. Man: *No Doña ninguna molestia en qué podemos colaborar?*
10. Me: *Quería saber si podría hacerles unas preguntitas para una investigación que estoy haciendo sobre el español en Londres.*

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<sup>3</sup> The translations offered are as idiomatic as possible. Thus, while “quhubo” in line 3 could be literally translated as “what’s up”, in this context it does not indicate the informal register that “what’s up” signals in English. It is a typically informal Colombian Spanish greeting. “Caballero ilustre”, on the other hand, is formal and used to address men of upper social class. An idiomatic translation could have rendered it as “sir” instead. However, the presence of “sir” would not necessarily be oriented to as marked in a service encounter conducted in English.



11. Man: (while the other two are eating) *Ay qué pena con usted Doña pero es que estamos desayundo recién*

12. Me: *No hay problema, buen provecho*

Idiomatic translation

8. Me: Good morning, sorry to bother you

9. Man: No M'am not at all, how can we help you<sup>U</sup>?

10. Me: I wondered if I could ask you a few questions<sup>DIM</sup> for a study I'm conducting on Spanish in London

11. Man: (while the other two are eating) Ah what a shame with you<sup>U</sup> M'am but we're about to have breakfast

12. Me: No problem, bon appétit.

At line 1, the enquirer utters what might be considered an overly polite greeting to address the cook of a market eatery. This is observed by the inclusion of the qualifying vocative *caballero ilustre* ("honourable gentleman"). The vocative, which was clearly articulated and heard by the cook, is typically used to address prestigious men in Colombia of upper social class. It occasioned a marked reaction by the cook who, instead of responding with a greeting, uttered a repair token (line 2). The enquirer thus reformulated the greeting by proffering an informal greeting typical of Colombian Spanish (l. 3 *quihubo* "what's up?", idiomatically "hello" or "hi"). This second greeting is received with silence immediately after which the enquirer offers the reason that motivated the verbal encounter. The reason is formulated as an enquiry: a polar interrogative in the present indicative following the informal conjugation of the second person pronoun in the variety of Colombian Spanish spoken in Antioquia and Valle del Cauca (Lipski 1995) (line 5 *necesitás* corresponding to the

conjugation of *vos*). The cook responds accordingly (line 6 *tenés* in keeping with the conjugation for *vos*) and the enquirer proceeds to sit at the table with his friends.

On approaching the enquirer's table and greeting them with a perfunctory apologetic formula (*perdonen la molestia* "Sorry to bother you" line 8), the enquirer responds with deferential forms characteristic of Bogotano Spanish (*No Doña ninguna molestia* "Not M'am' not at all") followed by a formal form of address (*colaborale* "help you<sup>U</sup>" line 9). Further evidence of the formal treatment I received is illustrated at line 11 (*Ay qué pena con usted Doña*) where the formal second person pronoun (i.e., *usted*) is inserted when, in theory, this is not strictly needed in a pro-drop language such as Spanish. It thus becomes evidently clear to me and perhaps earlier on to the cook too by virtue of the enquirer's accent, that the enquirer was not from Antioquia or the Valle del Cauca.

An analysis of the interactional exchange between the cook and enquirer allowed us to interpret the enquirer's greeting as marked by way of the reaction it received from the cook and its subsequent reformulation. Further, the main reason for the encounter (line 5) shone light on the greeting's strategic function as oriented to seeking ingratiation. Despite the greeting sounding conventionally polite, especially to those not familiar with the rich diversity of Colombian Spanish, its politeness function cannot be ascertained by sole reference to the interaction or be fully comprehended by the observance of similar greetings in initial service encounters at the market. In other words, how can its symbolic value beyond the marked reaction it receives from the cook and its reformulation by the enquirer be ascertained? Further, what is the analytic value of the contextual knowledge that informs the interactional details observed?

I have maintained that the cook's potential recognition of a Bogotano twang coupled with the insertion of a deferential vocative and its reaction, allowed the analyst to understand the initial greeting as not business as usual. However, the extent to which the greeting can be

claimed to be conventionally polite in terms of social expectancies or strategically motivated, requires us to go beyond this interaction. This can be done by examining a collection of service encounters at the Market to ascertain how they are designed and unfold. This knowledge can then serve as a parameter against which deviant service encounter patterns can be identified. In addition, ethnographic fieldwork such as observations conducted over time and space (in various shops in the two main Latin American enclaves in London) and interviews, enable the analyst to go beyond the observed interaction and capture its breadth. Concretely, it allows us to understand the larger context in which the practices we seek to understand are embedded, and their social meaning. Additionally, it enables us to make sense of the interactions we observe as meaningful parts of the world created and inhabited by the participants under study. Put differently, ethnographic research allows us to set the practices we capture in their motivational setting (Gumperz 1983).

The Latin American linguistic sub-market of London is a source of “value-giving in itself” where the Paisa dialect and to a lesser extent the Valluno dialect of the Antioquia and Valle del Cauca Departments, respectively, have acquired trading currency within the Colombian and larger Spanish-speaking Latin American diaspora. This is not surprising given the migratory trajectories of many of the Colombians, where many Antioquians and Vallecaucanos have become gatekeepers – controlling access to many of the jobs that are available for migrants who came later. Many of the Colombians who came in the nineteen-eighties came from areas which suffered significant political unrest, as in the Department of Antioquia (e.g., Medellin, Manizales, Pereira) and Valle del Cauca (e.g., Cali). This contingency led to the establishment of a group of Colombians with regular and relatively long length of residence. The need of later arrivals to gain access to employment coupled with the cultural segregation of Latin Americans in London, provides a fertile environment for the appropriation of linguistic features that in Colombia would have sounded alien for

some of them. Put differently, the navigation of the linguistic affordances of Colombian Spanish, and particularly the adoption of linguistic features of what in Colombia are regarded as less prestigious or educated forms of the language (e.g., *vos* v. *tú*), are indicative of the socio-political and economic contingencies for those in London whose migration has not yet paid dividends. We can surmise that later arrivals such as Bogotanos adapt their recognizable “prestigious” urban dialect to the economic realities of making a livelihood in London. This means a kind of re-enregistering (Agha 2007) of some forms, making them now into signs of diasporic belonging – as opposed to purely Colombian regionalism. This is observed in the performance of access rituals, such as greetings and farewells, among others. It is these shibboleths which are being picked up by later arrivals as their incorporation into the co-ethnic labour market is mostly brokered by the Antioquians and Vallecaucanos. Put differently, given that Latin Americans are reliant on their ethnolinguistic group for (occupational) mobility, relational connections among co-ethnics occupy a higher order in terms of employment opportunities within the sector. Thus, Spanish with currency (at the time of ethnography, this meant Paisa or Valluno) can initially open the doors to employability. This is because Paisa, Valluno and English occupy a vertical scale, one of difference, hierarchies and mobility (Bloomaert 2007) within the co-ethnic service economy.

In short, an interactional analysis coupled with the knowledge of the historical context and of how co-ethnic relations are forged enabled us to understand the greeting in example 1 as overly polite. Specifically, as an out-of-place formula by way of the reaction it received, and by extension, as non-indexical of the politeness expectations in the (service) encounters at the market. An interaction-based analysis thus allowed us to interpret the greeting as not business as usual, hence as strategic, and to check our interpretation in the unfolding discourse of the encounter. In addition, ethnographic knowledge warranted the interpretation of the greeting as indexing something else which would have otherwise escaped the analyst’s

attention. It suggested that the enquirer was a relatively recent arrival versus the cook's relatively longer length of settlement, and that the greeting was a case re-enregisterment for occupational mobility purposes. The combination of an interactional analysis of the encounter with ethnography allows us to build a bridge between the observed microphenomena and social indicators such as patterns of unequal access to resources among migrant flows as they are constituted through interaction (Cicourel 1980). It sets the greeting and the encounter within its motivational setting (Gumperz 1983) adding validity to the analysis without the analyst having to recur to a different interactional context in which the participants are probed. Perhaps most importantly, it allows us to reflect on the value of politeness practices as a way of engaging in sociality (Márquez Reiter and Kádár in press). Succinctly, example 1 shows that politeness is a constituent practice of looking for employment. Notwithstanding this, it is of a lower-order in terms of its contribution to the ultimate realization of a higher-order practice: sustaining a living. It thus follows that while shared politeness considerations may help to oil the relational wheels of sociality, other practices such as having or creating the right connections are of higher value.

#### **4.2 Perceptions of (in)directness in a contact zone**

The example previously analyzed together with the one examined in this section were gathered in two markets, respectively. Both of them represent contact zones (Pratt 1991). Contact zones are “social spaces where migrants meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1991: 5). While contact zones are certainly not new, the contact between Spanish-speaking Latin Americans from different cultural backgrounds is ubiquitous and the main *raison d'être* of the ethnic enclaves where the examples in this article were collected. These spaces potentially offer alternative labour market possibilities that do not demand the same social and cultural skills of the

receiving country. Specifically, they eliminate language and cultural barriers in the incorporation of (new) migrants into the co-ethnic economy and offer the possibility to inhabit a position of relational worth from which migrants may engage in a positive sociality (see, for example, Englund 2002; Jansen and Löfving 2009). Difference in these spaces is a quotidian experience. While it is noticed, it is generally reacted to as unmarked, especially as observed in the goal-oriented exchanges of the for-profit service encounters of the market. In the examples analyzed in this article, however, difference is noticed. It is attributed to behaviour that exceeds politeness expectations as discussed in example 1 or falls short of it as shown in example 2 below. In the case of the latter, politeness expectations are deployed as means to rationalize “othering”.

As it is well-known, especially to readers of this journal, one of the key areas that (im)politeness has examined is the connection between politeness practices and the levels of (in)directness participants can deploy to enact them (Brown and Levinson 1987). A wealth of research on the relationship between indirectness and politeness has amply demonstrated that the presence of an indirectness formula does not *ipso facto* guarantee a politeness consideration (e.g., Blum-Kulka 1990; Thomas 1995). In addition, different varieties of the same basic language have been shown to vary in their degree of tentativeness and indirectness (e.g., Márquez Reiter 2002) and the extent to which the external or internal padding of a given action (i.e., tentativeness) such as a request adds an element of politeness to the mismatch between sentence structure and illocutionary force (i.e., indirectness – Searle, 1969) (e.g., *Can I possibly ask to do X, please?* Relative to *Can I ask you to do X, please?*). Most of this work, however, has focused on cross-cultural data collected in specific educated lingua-cultural contexts which are then subjected to comparative analysis. Until now, very few politeness-inspired studies have paid attention to the issues of the mobility characteristic of the globalized world in which we live (cf. Márquez Reiter 2011), and on

what the everyday contact with cultural others means in terms of politeness, especially for those who live in multicultural spaces. Put differently, the way in which politeness (or the lack of politeness) is understood in dynamic spaces inhabited by social actors whose voices are often under-represented has escaped the purview of the fundamentally middle-class milieu on which politeness studies have comfortably sat.

The example in question constitutes a short segment of a recorded interview with a shop owner in the Elephant & Castle shopping area. Juan, originally from the Valle del Cauca, Colombia, arrived in London in the late 80s and managed to establish himself as a relatively successful businessman. In this extract from the interview, he categorizes onward Latin American migrants, especially those who came to London having lived in Spain, as bereft of politeness expectancies. This is observed with regard to the level of directness with which an onward Latin American migrant packaged an enquiry about the location of the shopping centre's toilet. The specific case refers to a Bolivian onward migrant, as evidenced especially by some features of her dialect (e.g., the use of *aseos* instead of *baños* [both translated as 'toilets' in English], directness level and her accent [the pronunciation of "aseos" with [s], a voiceless, alveolar, fricative, rather than [θ], the Northern Peninsular Spanish voiceless, interdental fricative]).

Example 2 – *Elephant & Castle* – Interview 7 – 25/4/2015

1. Juan: *Y se acerca a la puerta del centro comercial sin siquiera dar los buenos días*
2. Me: *mmh*
3. Juan: *entra nomás y pregunta sin más ¿dónde están los aseos?*
4. Me: *ha ha*
5. Juan: *Cómo así? estos españoletes<sup>DIM</sup> qué creen, que porque vienen de España pueden hablar sin modales?*

6. Me: *ha ha*
7. Juan: *pues no la dejé pasar al cuarto de baño (.) le dije que era solo para clientes*
8. Me: *y qué respondió?*
9. Juan: *no recuerdo ahora (.)pues le habrá tocado aguantar ha ha*

Translation

1. Juan: and she comes to the door of the shopping centre without even saying good morning
2. Me: mmh
3. Juan: she comes as if nothing and just like that asks where is the toilet?
4. Me: ha ha
5. Juan: How come? These *españoles* what do they think, that because they come from Spain they can speak with no manners?
6. Me: ha ha
7. Juan: well I didn't let her use the toilet (.) I said to her that it was only for clients
8. Me: and what did she say?
9. Juan: I can't remember now (.) but she must have had to hold it ha ha

Beyond the negative categorization of onward migrants from Spain as *españoles* ('little Spaniards') by Latin American migrants with a longer length of residence (Patiño-Santos and Márquez Reiter 2019), example 2 showcases what at first sight may be explicated in terms of different politeness orientations in intercultural encounters. Specifically, it underlies the perceived directness of Peninsular Spanish relative to other varieties of Spanish which instead have been shown to have an orientation to indirectness (e.g., Placencia and García



2007; Méndez Vallejo 2014). This orientation difference is invoked as a justification of the interviewee's evaluation of the enquirer as bereft of politeness (*buenos modales* "good manners"). From a politeness perspective, therefore, the recounting of the action and its assessment could be explained by the fact that indirection in any language or language variety must be subject to different levels of understanding depending on shared knowledge (Gumperz 1983; Tannen 1986 on American English). In light of this, we may argue that the enquirer's behaviour became noticeable as it was rendered culturally inappropriate insofar as its direct packaging and absence of a preceding greeting. From a politeness perspective we can surmise that Juan's metapragmatic assessment pointed to behaviour that fell short of politeness expectations, namely its perceived lack of civility in initial encounters among Latin Americans in London. The enquirer was probably a relatively recent onward migrant from Spain who had had little interpersonal contact with more established Latin Americans in London beyond basic service transactions at the enclaves.

While in many of parts of Spain, as elsewhere, asking for directions to the toilets within a shopping centre (under the assumption that the enquirer will make use of the facilities) can be directly uttered on the basis of the shared knowledge that such an enquiry represents a no-cost action (Brown and Levinson 1987) and is often allowable to those who may not be clients of the establishment, the situation in the Latin American enclave where the interaction took place is different. First, ethnographic observations indicate that indirect forms are typically heard in the formulation of general enquiries by the then primarily Colombian staff who worked in the shops therein and the clientele. Secondly, and most importantly, the observations I gathered when standing near the toilets to observe customers at a nearby shop attest to the fact that the shopping centre's toilets (one for men and one for women) are rarely used by passers-by. This may be explained by the fact that they are not sign posted. Although the toilets are not locked and hence, in theory, available to everyone,

they tend to be exclusively used by staff at the establishment and the clientele. It is indeed the former that are responsible for their maintenance on a rotating basis rather than a cleaning company.

In the case of example 2, above, ethnographic information allows us to make sense of the reported incident as packaged within a superficial cloak of politeness but not mainly being about politeness. It enables us to understand the metapragmatic assessment of the enquirer's behaviour as speaking of the larger sociocultural context in which the encounter took place rather than simply being an indexical of politeness expectations of the action itself. It represents a case of "othering" resulting from the then palpable tensions between different flows of Latin American migrants in the context of the rescinding of already limited local resources – namely, the arrival of onward Latin American migrants from Europe (especially from Spain, following the 2008 economic crisis) and the imminent displacement of (migrant) social groups in light of the increasing gentrification of socially deprived areas of London (see Image 1 – bottom left hand-corner). As a result of this, competition for resources in the segmented co-ethnic niche of the economy that Latin Americans mainly occupy, intensified (Márquez Reiter and Patiño-Santos 2017). In view of this, the combination of ethnographic information and linguistic analytical tools from the field of politeness enabled us to warrant the analysis of Juan's assessment as related to politeness without it being primarily about issues of politeness. In keeping with the previous example, it allowed us to valorize the importance and function of politeness in the larger scheme of things. It also offered us a snapshot of the extent to which cultural norms can be negotiated in interactions between those with and without access to resources.

## **5 Conclusion**

In this article I set out to explore the benefits of adopting an ethnographic approach to (im)politeness research. I did this by offering an analysis of two service encounter examples gathered from observations and interviews conducted with Colombian migrants in the two largest Latin American enclaves in London. The two examples feature pragmatic phenomena that have been on the politeness agenda since its early beginnings: form and function of greetings and the relationship between indirectness and politeness.

The politeness practices that the speakers in the examined examples engaged in were circumscribed to a given field of interaction: encounters between Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in two Latin American enclaves in the city. These enclaves represent a space of relations between Spanish-speaking Latin American migrants who engage with one another by virtue of some shared social attributes, such as a language, the need to engage in positive sociality and sustain a livelihood. Yet, Spanish-speaking Latin Americans are not conceived of as a homogeneous group. They are different from each other in terms of their cultural backgrounds and occupy different positions within the field. Consider, for instance, the position of a relatively recent arrival in search of employment in the co-ethnic niche economy compared with that of a more established migrant with access to market resources. We have thus seen how boundaries between members of the diverse Latin American group were delimited by what we may at first sight term conflict (i.e., access to scant resources) rather than group solidarity. Thus, we observed how the enquirer of example 1 navigated the affordances of Colombian Spanish to cross what he oriented to as a boundary between the cook and himself. Similarly, example 2, offered us a window into how difference (despite being an everyday experience in the two sites) is constructed as a boundary and how this, in turn, is used to position some group members as subaltern.

Importantly, the selected site is a natural setting in which Latin Americans interact with one another on a regular basis. It is also space, which I as a Latin American, feel

relatively acquainted with by virtue of my length of residence in London and visiting the space on various occasions as a customer prior to conducting research. Although I am not a complete insider and may be seen by some as an “elite” migrant by virtue of my occupation and my physical appearance, I have some kind of connection with the place, including contacts who work there or regularly visit these spaces. This, coupled with the fact that the enclaves are public spaces has helped me to conduct observations from a variety of standpoints over a period of time without raising ethical concerns, and made the recruiting of interviewee participants a relatively easy task.

Ethnographic knowledge allows us to give primacy to the configuration of relations between members of the social group. It enables us to capture the diversity of the participants instead of conceptualizing them via bounded categories, such as Spanish-speaking Latin Americans who share a more or less fixed basic language, or economic migrants without taking into account their length of residence in London or their migration journeys. Or to see the two enclaves as physical settings or places which are more or less fixed rather than relational spaces subject to historical and economic changes. It also enables us to understand that the speakers in the examples occupy different positions within the social spaces of the two enclaves and are bound together in a relationship of mutual struggle or dependence (Desmond 2014). This knowledge, in turn, can help us to better comprehend the complexity of the social relations of the members of the social group observed and their structures. It is against this background that we, as analysts, can better capture the value of politeness within the transactional order of the group and valorize its relative importance. In other words, it can help to delimit the value of (im)politeness practices in the social reality of the speakers we examine.

Although time consuming, sustained observations of Latin Americans at the two sites enabled the capturing of shifts in the construction and reaction to (im)politeness and the

normative expectations that inform them. It thus allowed us to understand (im)politeness across time in these sites and the factors behind such changes.

We have seen how the incorporation of an ethnographic perspective helped us to describe the culture in which the politeness practices we observed took place from the perspective of the participants' themselves. Rather than taking culture (including the language of the participants in the settings we examine) as a given entity by virtue of the comparability or cultural translatability of the communicative settings examined (e.g., educational contexts, for-profit contexts, televised data, etc.). Or by way of the participants' native-speakerness which, in turn, would help the analyst make sense of their (im)politeness orientation. Fieldwork allows us to attest the different repertoires that participants may deploy across contexts, the interpersonal relationships they forge and the dynamic nature of (im)politeness practices.

In this article I sought to broaden and expand the horizons of (im)politeness research by addressing, albeit in a small way, the politics of representation and reporting the voices of the under-represented by drawing on the societal benefits of a method rarely used in the field. I argued that an ethnographic perspective allows us to observe (im)politeness within the reality of diverse human relations rather than assume relationships as a given and the language in which they are maintained as homogeneous. Ethnography offers the analyst fundamental knowledge of the larger context in which members of a group interact. I argued that this is needed to fully comprehend (im)politeness practices and their relative importance in the social reality of the speakers we examine.

I invite scholars to join forces and look beyond the traditional silhouettes of the borders originally set in the field of (im)politeness and speak to current sociocultural and economic problems.

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