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ETHICAL-MORAL FOUNDATIONS AND SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF POLITENESS

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Abstract

This article examines the ethical, moral, and sociolinguistic foundations of politeness. It first defines the concepts of ethics, morality, and politeness and then analyzes how these notions intersect in everyday communicative behavior. Drawing on philosophical, sociological, and linguistic sources, the study argues that politeness is not only a manifestation of personal virtue but also a socially regulated system of norms that shapes interpersonal communication. The paper further explores how culturally conditioned politeness norms vary across societies and how they relate to sociolinguistic competence. The findings suggest that a full understanding of politeness requires integrating ethical principles with linguistic form, social hierarchy, and contextual sensitivity.

Keywords

politeness, ethics, morality, sociolinguistic norms, communicative behavior, social hierarchy.

Introduction

Politeness occupies a central place in the study of ethical behavior and communication. To delineate its basis from the perspective of ethics, morality, and social relations, we must examine carefully the meanings of ethics, morality, and politeness. The term *ethics* was introduced by Aristotle to present moral virtues as a specialized domain of knowledge. Cicero later coined the Latin *moralis* as the counterpart to Greek *ethikos*. In many languages, including Uzbek and English, terms such as “ethics,” “morality,” “politeness,” and “decorum” overlap in their usage and reflect normative conduct.

In philosophical lexicons, morality is defined as a system regulating human actions in society, a special form of social consciousness, and a type of social relation. Thus, ethics refers to moral theory and the study of morally right action. A fundamental ethical principle—often phrased as the “Golden Rule”—is: *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

In English, *polite* broadly connotes respectful, considerate behavior toward others. Its origin lies in the Latin *politus* (“refined, polished”), but it gained its modern sense in English in the 17th–18th centuries. In dictionaries, *polite* is defined as having good manners, being socially considerate, or being mindful of others’ feelings. Across definitions, a shared feature emerges: observance of societal normative principles in conduct.

Thus, politeness may be conceptualized as socially acceptable behavior characterized by respect and regard for others. The meanings of “ethics,” “morality,” and “politeness” share core features: adherence to rules of conduct, social approval, and recognition of individual dignity. Politeness norms manifest the ethical-moral rules underlying speech and interpersonal behavior.

One of the key ethical aspects of politeness is adherence to societal rules that underlie effective communication. Russian scholar Y.V. Rozhdestvensky describes morality as the collection of customary rules regulating human relationships, rooted in folk tradition and social practice. Linguists N.D. Arutyunova and E.V. Paducheva refer to these rules as binding for members of society who must internalize communicative obligations.

Behavioral patterns or “cultural scenarios” in communication—termed by linguist L.V. Markina—reflect ethical boundaries and social hierarchy. Politeness norms differ across societies; their selection depends on social distance, cultural belonging, participant roles, and discourse context.

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In sum, the ethical-moral dimension of politeness involves rule observance, respect for social hierarchy, attentiveness to others' feelings, and striving for socially acceptable interaction. Politeness also functions as a linguistic and sociolinguistic system that encodes cultural values and interactional norms.

Studying politeness thus demands an integrated perspective: ethical, cultural, and linguistic. Without acknowledging cultural and societal norms, analyzing politeness strategies in English or any language remains incomplete.

Literature Review. Scholars in philosophy and linguistics have long addressed the interplay between morality, politeness, and social interaction. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* laid groundwork for the systematic study of virtues, and later thinkers (e.g., Cicero, Confucius) connected moral conduct with social etiquette. Modern philosophers discuss politeness in terms of respect, autonomy, and interpersonal ethics (e.g., Kantian respect for persons, discourse ethics).

In linguistics and pragmatics, Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (face-saving) is foundational; they differentiate positive politeness (building solidarity) and negative politeness (avoiding imposition). Leech (1993) proposes a "politeness principle" with maxims like tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy. Fraser (1990) treats politeness as conventional indirectness. More recently, theories of relational work (Locher & Watts, 2005) and dynamic politeness in cross-cultural pragmatics emphasize that politeness is negotiated in discourse and shaped by power, culture, and context.

Sociolinguistic research (e.g., Goffman's face theory, Ervin-Tripp, Holmes) underscores that politeness strategies vary by social roles, status, and situational norms. Researchers in intercultural pragmatics show that politeness norms diverge across cultures (e.g., Japanese *keigo*, Korean *yon'go*, English direct/indirect modes). In Central Asia, studies on Uzbek politeness (e.g., on honorifics, address terms) highlight how ethics and linguistic choice intersect.

While much literature probes politeness in English and East Asian languages, fewer works center the ethical philosophical foundations in Uzbek or Turkic sociocultural settings. This article seeks to fill that gap by articulating the moral-ethical and sociolinguistic dimensions of politeness in general and how they correlate with linguistic expression.

Methods of the research. This study is primarily theoretical and descriptive, employing the following methods:

1. Conceptual analysis – comparing the concepts of ethics, morality, decorum, and politeness across philosophical and linguistic traditions.
2. Comparative semantics – examining how equivalent terms (e.g., English *politeness*, Uzbek *xushmuomalalik*) overlap and diverge.
3. Discourse analysis – sampling conversational politeness strategies in English and Uzbek settings (from corpora, dialogues, published texts).
4. Cross-cultural comparison – analyzing how different societies embed politeness norms in language and social roles.

Data sources include philosophical texts (Aristotle, modern ethicists), dictionaries, pragmatics and sociolinguistics research, and annotated corpora of English-Uzbek spoken dialogues.

Results and Discussion. Ethical-Moral Foundations. Politeness emerges from an ethical demand: to treat others as morally legitimate agents worthy of respect. The golden rule underscores reciprocity, not dominance. Politeness norms internalize moral constraints such as humility, indirectness, deference, and self-restraint.

Politeness rules often correspond to social norms and taboos – what may be "polite" in one culture might be "overly indirect" or "insincere" in another. Social hierarchy and roles affect which politeness strategies are acceptable. The obligations to obey cultural rules, respect status, and attend to others' feelings constitute core ethical dimensions.

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Sociolinguistic Dimensions. Politeness in language is not merely a matter of lexical formulas—it is embedded in sociolinguistic competence, the capacity to choose strategies that fit the interlocutor, situation, and social expectations. For instance:

- Use of honorifics or formal pronouns in Uzbek or other languages;
- Choice between direct vs. indirect speech acts;
- Use of mitigating devices (hedges, modal verbs);
- Frequency and placement of courtesy markers ("please," "thank you").

These strategies rest on shared cultural expectations ("scripts") and relational ideals. Politeness conventions vary across speech communities; they reflect cultural conceptions of face, respect, authority, and solidarity.

Comparative Observations. In English, *polite* often aligns with conversational strategies: saying "could you," using softeners, avoiding blunt imperatives. In Uzbek, politeness may more heavily rely on morphological and honorific dimensions (addressee respect, use of "*siz"*, deferential forms). A direct English "Could you pass me that?" may correspond in Uzbek to a more elaborate deferential phrasing.

The acceptability of in-group familiarity and informality differs across societies; what is polite among close friends in one culture may be impolite in another. Hence, a complete model of politeness must integrate ethical principles, social roles, and linguistic form simultaneously.

Conclusion. This article argued that politeness is not merely a linguistic strategy but a manifestation of ethical-moral principles realized through sociolinguistic norms. Politeness norms reflect moral imperatives—respect, reciprocity, empathy—as well as social structures and communicative expectations.

A well-rounded understanding of politeness must integrate:

1. The ethical-moral foundations (why respect and reciprocity matter),
2. The cultural and social norms (who merits what kind of politeness when), and
3. The linguistic strategies (how politeness is encoded in speech).

Future empirical work should compare politeness realizations in English and Uzbek speech communities, examine how norms shift in multilingual settings, and explore pedagogical applications in second-language teaching.

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