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Politeness ... Four Levels

Politeness - the use of respectful language to maintain positive social interactions - is very important in language. The 'linguistic' patterns of politeness are fairly straightforward, but the 'social patterns' of politeness in use are much more complex and varied. The most basic rule is to use '*please*' and '*thank you*,' with more complex patterns of politeness using '*indirect phrasing*' (see below). I think it is illustrative to place politeness alongside its non-politeness alternatives; to do this, I propose that we organize politeness into four levels: '*no-politeness*, *low-politeness*, *ordinary politeness*, *high-politeness*'. Here are some examples - together with my interpretations.

Number 1: Politeness in an offer: 「いかがですか」

Level 1: *A drink? or Something to drink?*

This is the shortest form in which an offer can be made - it consists of only a direct statement referring to *the item* that is being offered. It is casual, with no politeness intended by the speaker, and we assume, none expected by the partner.

Level 2: *Do you want something to drink? or Do you want anything to drink?*

Similar to Level 1, but slightly extended, these are both straightforward and refer directly to the listener in a very basic linguistic pattern without any hint of politeness: '*Do you want ...*' The response would likely be at the lowest level - a simple statement of item: *Yes, orange juice* (perhaps adding *please*). Of course, the response may reflect an increase in politeness (as in Level 3 below) by using *would*: *Yes, I would like to have some orange juice*. (The difference between *something* and *anything* is a distinction between *wanting something that I have to give* versus *wanting anything that you can imagine ... if I have it*; let's save that for another REAL ENGLISH some other time.)

Level 3: *Would you like something to drink? or Would you like anything to drink?*

This is the 'textbook' example of politeness: it uses *would* in a question form to make an offer. The response would likely follow and use a *would* statement ... To increase the politeness, I might use an alternative to *like to have*, as in: *Yes, I would enjoy a glass of orange juice*.

Level 4: *Can I get you something / anything to drink?*

Can I offer you something / anything to drink?

In these versions, there is a clear inclusion of my action in the offer: *Can I do something for you?* This is a very polite form. However, notice even here there is a slight difference between the direct action of *Can I get you something* versus the indirect version: *Can I offer you something?* Similar to the Level 3 example of *like to have* versus *enjoy*, this reflects '*distance from the act*' ...*getting something for someone* and *offering something to someone* are at different 'distances' from the act: for me, the former is directly connected to the act (*get*) and

less polite while the latter (*offer*) is an offer to do the act and more polite.

Number 2: Politeness in an apology: 「お待たせ」

Level 1: *Oh, you are waiting.* + *Here, let me unlock the door.*

This might be when a teacher finds students waiting in front of a classroom that is still locked. In most cases, the teacher doesn't need to show politeness in such a situation and so uses a 'statement of fact.' It recognizes the situation, but neither acknowledges any hardship with the situation nor recognizes any responsibility for the situation. Notice that here, it is followed by a solution to the situation: *unlock the door.*

Level 2: *I'm sorry that you had to wait.* + *Here, let me unlock the door.*

The primary interpretation of this statement is a recognition of a hardship ... the hardship of *having had to wait.* In addition to the statement of fact - '*you had to wait*' - the hardship of having to wait is recognized, with '*I'm sorry*' at the beginning of the statement. It says that the fact that you had to wait is unfortunate and was probably a hardship for you. I am sorry about that hardship situation ... it is unfortunate. It expresses politeness by acknowledging the situation, but does not expressly acknowledge any responsibility for the hardship.

The final two include an acknowledgement together with acceptance of responsibility for the fact that you had to wait. Both include specific reference to '*keep you waiting*' ... '*kept you waiting*.' Inherent in '*keep you waiting*' is a cause & effect relationship ... something '*kept you waiting*' ... I am acknowledging that and taking responsibility for it.

Level 3: *I'm sorry to have kept you waiting.*

The first is a bit distant and less polite ... in that there is no inclusion of the pronoun 'I' in the statement ...

Level 4: *I'm sorry that I have kept you waiting.*

In this final version, there is a clear statement that *I* am the reason you have had to wait ...

'*I am sorry that I have been the cause of the result of you having to wait.*' Very polite.

Number 3: Another example of *distance from the act* is in what I will call '*distance from the imperative*.' Consider:

Tell me how to do this. Show me how to do this. [add *please* either at the beginning or the end]

Can you / Could you tell me how to do this?

Would you tell me how to do this? [*Would* is the usual threshold of politeness]

Would you be so kind as to tell me how to do this? [request of *kindness* - very polite]

Would you mind telling me how to do this? [the *would you mind* verb-ing pattern]

I wonder if you could tell me how to do this? [use of *I wonder if you + could do this*]

Could I bother you to tell me how to do this? [use of *Could I bother you + to do this for me*]

I could probably find a couple more forms of '*distance from the imperative means increased politeness*' additions to add to these requests. That said, I think the progression is clear: from '*imperative - direct order - not very polite*' to something where the request is '*hidden*' '*politely*' within the statement.

So, please make note of the simple approach to politeness - use *please* and use *would* - but also recognize that politeness has deeper levels that can be shown in more complex use of language.

and by the way ... *Merry Christmas!* and *HAPPY NEW YEAR, 2026!*

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