

The Perils of Polite Misunderstandings

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Your friend debuts a questionable haircut and asks what you think of it. Brutal honesty would definitely hurt his feelings, so what do you say? Most people in this situation would probably opt for a vague or evasive response, along the lines of “It’s really unique!” or “It’s so you!” Politeness helps us get through awkward social situations like these and makes it easier for us to maintain our relationships. But a new article published in the October issue of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), suggests that this kind of politeness can have disastrous consequences, especially in high-stakes situations.

According to authors Jean-François Bonnefon and Wim de Neys of CNRS and Université de Toulouse and Aidan Feeney of Queen’s University, we resort to politeness strategies when we have to share information that might offend or embarrass someone or information that suggests someone has made a mistake or a bad choice. The more sensitive an issue is, the more likely we are to use these kinds of politeness strategies.

Politeness can become problematic, however, when it causes us to sacrifice clarity. Existing research suggests that politeness strategies can lead to confusion about the meaning of statements that, under other circumstances, would be clear. And this confusion is especially likely to occur in high-stakes situations, the very situations in which we are most likely to use politeness strategies.

Even worse, say the authors, it takes more of our cognitive resources to process these kinds of polite statements. Thus, “[w]e must think harder when we consider the possibility that people are being polite, and this harder thinking leaves us in a greater state of uncertainty about what is really meant.”

This confusion and uncertainty can have particularly negative consequences when safety and security are on the line – such as for pilots trying to fly a plane in an emergency or for a doctor trying to help a patient decide on a treatment. Politeness can also have serious consequences within corporate culture – people don’t want to embarrass their bosses or their co-workers, so they hesitate to point out when something looks amiss, even when potential fraud or misconduct might be involved.

So how can we make sure to get around the confusion of politeness? One option is to encourage people to be more assertive in high-stakes situations. Some companies, including airlines, have even instituted assertiveness training programs, but it’s not yet clear whether these programs really work.

Another option is to try to make the interpretation of polite statements easier for people. “Say that there is a tone, a prosodic feature which typically signals that politeness is at work,” says Bonnefon. If we can identify this tone, we could “train pilots or other professionals to react intuitively to that tone in order to treat it as a warning signal.”

While politeness can be detrimental in certain situations, Bonnefon takes pains to point out that the goal

of this research is not to encourage or license general impoliteness – “politeness is obviously a very positive behavior in most cases,” he concludes.