Toward a Performative Understanding of Politeness

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In this article, we argue that critical communication scholars have largely overlooked the study of politeness as a constitutive component of identity, culture, and power. We offer a critical-performative framework for critical scholars interested in studying politeness as a political, discursive, and embodied act. To develop this agenda, we first outline Brown and Levinson's postpositivist theory of politeness. We then review three challenges to their use of intentionality, Grice's cooperative principle, and Goffman's concept of face. These challenges are located in interactional, traditional critical, and discursive understandings of politeness (respectively). Next, we show how a performative understanding of politeness both encompasses the three challenges and offers a way to understand the role of politeness in identity formation. We conclude by suggesting that ethnographic methods, informed by performance ethnography, provide analytical tools consistent with a performative understanding of politeness.

Keywords: politeness theory, performativity, critical studies, face, facework

In the last 40 years, communication scholarship concerning politeness[1] has been indebted to Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness. Their theory, as well as the studies that draw upon it, are predicated primarily upon the postpositivist (i.e., functionalist) paradigm, which attempts to describe and predict human behavior (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Postpositivist scholarship concerning politeness is found in many subfields of communication studies, such as interpersonal communication (e.g., Ebert & Floyd, 2004; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998) and instructional communication (e.g., Kerssen-Griep, Hess, & Trees, 2003; Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008). The majority of these studies examine how politeness functions within compliance-gaining, requesting, refusing, and feedback behaviors.

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[1] Politeness refers to both verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors. Additionally, although we use the term "politeness" throughout the piece, (im)politeness better captures the range of meanings associated with politeness (e.g., impolite, polite, politic, or rude). However, we use the term politeness for the sake of clarity (see Watts, 2003).

Although postpositivist communication scholars have produced a large and rigorous corpus of scholarship concerning politeness, critical communication scholars have been largely silent on the subject.[2] This comparative lack of attention is troubling given that politeness is an important social regulatory norm. As Terkourafi (2011) notes in her historical account of politeness:

> [Politeness] norms effect social regulation inasmuch as they contribute to the reproduction of the social order that gave rise to them in the first place, legitimizing and consolidating it further . . . However, more than their moral aspect . . . what seems to bind together polite and religious principles is their association with the ruling class. . . . This allows them to play a gatekeeping role which is central to the smooth operation of society as we know it. . . . Understandably, their grip over society can be very strong. (p. 176)

Her insights suggest that politeness is neither simply a matter of local, interpersonal negotiation, nor a series of (un)successful strategies exchanged between interlocutors; rather, politeness must be addressed as a sociocultural act that draws upon and (re)produces social structures.

Therefore, this article proposes a theoretical agenda from a critical-performative perspective for studying politeness. A critical-performative approach is committed to "unveiling the political stakes that anchor cultural practices" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 179) and, as such, provides a suitable framework for understanding politeness as a culturally thick and power-laden practice. We argue that this approach can expand the terrain of politeness research beyond success/failure of communicative strategies to better deal with questions of culture, power, and identity. We articulate this framework using three bodies of literature that challenge parts of Brown and Levinson's framework. These traditions include interactional (Arundale, 1999, 2006; Haugh, 2007), traditional critical (Moon, 1999), and discursive (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003) approaches to studying politeness (see Blivtich, 2010 for an excellent overview of different approaches to politeness research). Scholars in each of these areas give important insights into varying assumptions that characterize the Brown-Levinson approach to politeness, which dominates communication studies scholarship.

We argue that performativity can build upon the three challenges to Brown and Levinson's (1987) work to provide a rigorous and politically hopeful analysis of politeness. Specifically, we use Butler's (1988, 1990, 1997) notion of citationality to understand politeness as a political and discursive act. Citationality refers to the invocation and (re)inscription of norms when subjects communicate. Butler uses this concept to argue that biological sex is not an *a priori* truth; rather, it emerges from subjects' citation of discourses that are embedded within matrices of power. A critical-performative understanding of politeness, through citationality, would suggest that how individuals come to learn, perform, and make meaning of politeness

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[2] We did not include research concerning civility in our review of literature, mainly due to traditional critical scholars' conceptual ambiguity when writing about politeness (as we note, Moon, 1999 is an exception). For example, Arnett and Arneson (1999) reject the idea that civility and politeness are interchangeable. Others, such as Simpson (2008) uses the terms politeness and civility (as well as manners, etiquette, or respectability) as largely interchangeable. Here, we conceive of politeness as sociolinguistic and pragmatist scholars have—as a category of social practices (rather than an ethicomoral framework).

draws upon and contributes to discourses that individuals embody in their communicative negotiations. Furthermore, it suggests that such practices can be disrupted to challenge oppressive hegemonic norms that are (re)inscribed through politeness rituals and everyday speech.

To formulate a critical-performative understanding of politeness, we have divided this article into four parts. First, we outline three major tenets of Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness to provide the foundation from which to proceed with the rest of the analysis. Specifically, we examine Brown and Levinson's use of intentionality (Grice, 1974), the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975, 1989), and face (Goffman, 1967) in their theory of politeness. Second, we draw upon the three challenges to Brown and Levinson's framework to argue that communication is interactionally achieved meaning making (Arundale, 1999), culture is contested (Moon, 1999), and that the notion of "face" should be replaced by native interpretations of politeness (Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). Third, we outline the theoretical tenets of performativity and explain how citationality can encompass and build upon the three critiques. Finally, we argue that a critical-performative understanding of politeness necessitates ethnographic methodologies, informed by the performative turn in ethnography (see Conquergood, 1991), are best suited to understanding politeness through performativity.

Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness

Brown and Levinson draw upon three interrelated concepts to formulate their theory of politeness. The first concept is Grice's (1974) formulation of intentionality. Arundale (1999) argues that Gricean intentionality is based upon encoding and decoding philosophies of communication (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1963). These philosophies conceptualize interlocutors as senders and receivers—meaning as an information transfer—and communication as a phenomenon with an identifiable beginning and end. Encoding and decoding philosophies conceptualize communication with the presupposition "that what agents do is related systematically to their intents, and thus that *intentions of actors are reconstructable by observers or recipients of actions*" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 7, emphasis ours). Although the signal may be blocked or corrupted by noise, as long as the interlocutors "are in order and the codes are identical at both ends, successful communication is guaranteed" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 4). In other words, when interlocutors share a common understanding of politeness, then the intention to be polite can be produced or recognized.

The second concept that Brown and Levinson draw upon, borrowed from Grice's (1975/1989) theory of implicature, is the cooperative principle (CP). Grice (1975/1989) defines the CP as communication that is maximally efficient in transferring information between interlocutors. He identifies four maxims of the cooperative principle. These maxims are quantity (i.e., giving the appropriate amount of information), quality (i.e., not to give false information), relation (i.e., to say what is relevant to the topic), and manner (i.e., to avoid purposeful ambiguity). Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that all interlocutors tacitly adhere to the CP and that, as model rational actors, they can and do act within its confines.

The final concept that Brown and Levinson use is Goffman's (1967) notion of face. Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as "the public self-image every member wants to claim for himself [*sic*]" (p. 61). They posit two types of face: positive (i.e., need for solidarity with others) and negative (i.e., need for autonomy from others). Behaviors that threaten the face of an individual are face-threatening acts (FTAs).

Brown and Levinson (1987) state that FTAs can endanger the solidarity shared between individuals (i.e., a threat to positive face) or constrain an individual's autonomy (i.e., a threat to negative face). Communicative acts that are more threatening require higher levels of polite communication to mitigate the threat to face.

By combining the three concepts, Brown and Levinson produce an account of how polite communication is produced and recognized. Senders produce polite communication when they believe that their initial communicative behaviors may be face-threatening to receivers. They can produce polite communication because they know what would be efficient to say (i.e., the CP) and engage in communication to attend to receivers' face (i.e., above the minimum required for information transfer). Receivers can recognize senders' polite communication by comparing senders' communication against the CP. If receivers' reconstruction of senders' intentions leads them to recognize that senders' communication is more than required by the CP and conducted for mitigating the threat to their faces, then polite communication has occurred.

Let us offer an example to ground this otherwise abstract section of the article. On one hand, if a sender says, "Pass the salt," the receiver reconstructs this message as an FTA that constrains her or his autonomy (i.e., a negative face). Furthermore, the receiver recognizes that the sender has done nothing to ameliorate the FTA (i.e., the utterance adheres to the CP) and thus characterizes this utterance as the least polite way to make a request (i.e., bald on record). On the other hand, if a sender says, "If it's not too much trouble, would you pass the salt," the receiver recognizes that, in addition to how the utterance functions as a request, the inclusion of "If it's not too much trouble" indicates a concern for his or her autonomy (i.e., negative politeness strategy). Additionally, the concern for the receiver's negative face is above the minimum amount of communication necessary to make a request. This recognition may lead the receiver to understand the second utterance as politer than the first utterance.

Collectively, the three concepts that constitute Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness are predicated upon postpositivist logics. As Eelen (2001) argues, their theory treats the CP, the communication, and the face as apprehendable facts that can be conceptualized *a priori*, measured, and ultimately predicted. Scholarship that draws upon their theory has provided sophisticated analyses into how politeness functions to promote interpersonal harmony through strategic conflict avoidance (Kasper, 1990). Within the communication studies discipline, most research utilizing Brown and Levinson's framework relies on self-reported surveys, which assume that some messages are politer than others based on their ability to mitigate face threat. As such, postpositivist scholars treat politeness as a construct that is self-evident, measurable, and predictable. In the next section, we detail some of the challenges that recent scholars have leveled against Brown and Levinson's theory.

Critical, Interactional, and Discursive Challenges to Brown and Levinson

Early challenges to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness focused primarily on the nature of specific concepts (e.g., an Eastern vs. Western understanding of face, see Haugh, 2007). However, recently, scholars have developed a set of comprehensive and ongoing critiques of the theoretical assumptions of Brown and Levinson's theory (see Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006). These emerging bodies of literature include the interactional (Arundale, 1999, 2006), traditional critical (Moon, 1999), and discursive (Eelen,

2001; Watts, 2003) views of politeness. Each perspective offers a unique contribution to reworking politeness research.[3] In this section, we detail how each view reframes assumptions that characterize mainstream politeness research, which draws from the Brown and Levinson tradition.

An Interactional View of Politeness

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness uses the concept of intentionality (Grice, 1974). Arundale (2006) describes intentionality as a predicated-upon Western modernist philosophy. He offers that, much like two cogs pushing one tooth to another and thus transferring energy from one to the other, intentionality presumes two monadic interlocutors who transfer information one to another. Furthermore, intentionality presumes "that language acts are separate, time delimited units . . . [that can be treated as] singular, isolated, and self contained *[sic]* events" (Arundale, 1999, p. 123). Communication can be said to have occurred when a receiver's behaviors are altered as a result of the sender's communicative behaviors. The concept of intentionality privileges a cognitivist understanding of communication and thus limits the researcher's analysis to the effectiveness of the senders' intent to be polite.

The realization that politeness may be better accounted for in interactional communication, rather than encoding and decoding models, is first hinted at in Brown and Levinson's (1987) self-critique of their theory of politeness. They state:

> Social interaction is remarkable for its emergent properties which transcend the characteristics of the individuals that jointly produce it; *this emergent character is not something for which our current theoretical models are well equipped*. . . . Work on interaction as a system thus remains a fundamental research priority, and the area from which improved conceptualizations of politeness are most likely to emerge. (p. 48, emphasis ours)

Scholars have taken up the challenge to account for the emergent properties of politeness through interactional models of communication (Arundale, 1999, 2006; Haugh, 2007). Arundale (1999) describes communication as, "inter-actional events during which participants incrementally coconstitute a sequence of actions in which each new action is contingent on past and possible future actions of other participants" (p. 125). In other words, communication may be best understood, not a series of turn-taking behaviors between monadic individuals, but rather as a fundamentally intersubjective practice that encompasses individuals' past, present, and future communicative practices. In this view, interlocutors are always already communicating because they are always producing verbal or nonverbal communicative behaviors as well as listening, processing, and interpreting both verbal and nonverbal cues. This understanding undermines the binary sender-receiver model of communication and thus opens up a new landscape for studying politeness.

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[3] The discursive approach challenges the use of face in politeness research, but still relies upon an encoding and decoding philosophy of communication. The critical approach shows that culture is contested, but does not account for the differences between first and second order politeness. The interactional approach shows how politeness is intersubjective, but does not have an explicitly critical focus. Only by utilizing all three can the beginning of a performative approach to politeness emerge.

Politeness, within an interactional model of communication, is an interpretive act within individuals' interactions. However, this interpretive act is not merely an individualistic process. As Arundale (1999) argues, politeness is an individual *and* social process. Individuals' communication is considered polite by negotiating local communicative interactions and cultural codes. This suggests that politeness is a contextual form of communication, rather than a decoding process based upon some abstract standard (e.g., the CP). Speakers evaluate the politeness of another's communicative behaviors based upon the time and location that it is produced, in addition to the (non)verbal data that constitute it. Politeness is achieved when both interlocutors negotiate and agree that polite communication has occurred.

An interactional view of politeness shifts the unit of analysis from the monadic individual to—at minimum—a dyad. Additionally, an interactional analysis of politeness would take into account the context in which the communicative exchange took place. For example, within this tradition, parents who teach their children how to politely accept a gift are not simply offering descriptions of the most effective politeness strategies; rather, they are providing moral, political, and interactional guides that are grounded in a particular historic moment (Terkourafi, 2011). As such, understanding politeness within the interactional approach invites scholars to address what politeness achieves beyond strategic conflict avoidance or interpersonal harmony. Analysis would not rely upon a list of politeness strategies that can be generalized across contexts; rather, the researcher would be interested in understanding the links between the interlocutors' understanding of politeness and the cultural scripts they draw upon to make meaning of (im)polite communication. Ultimately, an interactional approach shifts the focus from examining the atomistic bits of language for their (lack of) adherence to an *a priori* standard, to a holistic understanding of communication in action.

A Traditional Critical View of Politeness

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is founded upon the belief that everyone within a culture tacitly follows the same cultural code (i.e., the CP). Eelen (2001) points out that this view of politeness implicitly foregrounds a Parsonian worldview. Parsonian sociology is predicated upon the notion that individuals within a culture share common cultural codes and that all behaviors are culturally scripted—foregrounding a mechanistic view of cultural practices and individuals. Similarly, Brown and Levinson's use of the CP assumes that individuals have a common set of cultural codes by which to evaluate utterances as impolite or polite. But, if culture provides the cultural codes for individuals, where does culture come from? This question cannot be answered within a Gricean framework because of its reliance on *a priori* theorization. As a result, how individuals come to understand what constitutes polite communication remains undertheorized because of their reliance on Gricean intentionality (Arundale, 1999; 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Haugh, 2007).

Critical scholarship is predicated upon the assumption that culture is socially constructed and mediated by power relations (Moon, 2002). In this view, culture is not commonly shared, but is rife with contradictions, neuroses, and conflicts (Fiske, 1991; Mumby, 1997). These assumptions suggest that it is crucial to understand how politeness is socially constructed within matrices of power in a given historic moment. Eelen (2001) argues

that politeness is inherently argumentative[4]—it always occurs in situations where individuals can lose or gain economically, socially, or politically. As Hawes (2006) points out, there are clear repercussions for individuals when their communication is labeled as polite, impolite, or rude. He argues:

> Unstated in Brown and Levinson's . . . catalog of conversational relations, for example, is the hegemonic power lying dormant, but always at the ready to ensure that only the appropriate is articulated with practice. To violate the rules of politeness is to risk embarrassment and shame, certainly, but also madness and death at the extreme hegemonic edges. (p. 35)

Traditional critical scholarship interrogates how politeness, as a social norm and ideal, has come to have value within contemporary society. Furthermore, it investigates the social, cultural, and material conditions that influence individuals' understanding of how to be polite. For example, people of color have been historically and are presently excluded from full access to social institutions (e.g., schools, courthouses, legislatures) to maintain a White-centric, bourgeoisie decorum (hooks, 1994). One can hardly look at the interpersonal dynamic of politeness without attending to how polite communication plays a larger role in maintenance of unequal power relations among individuals.

Researchers who take up a critical approach to politeness are therefore interested in how it is a site of contest and ask, "What is at stake in the communicative negotiation of politeness?" Moon's (1999) analysis of politeness provides an excellent example of how investigations of politeness can be informed by traditional critical theories of power. She documents how White women are taught from an early age to value and perform a "good White girl" discursive position. This position is predicated upon racial loyalty, deference to patriarchy, and bourgeoisie values. For example, a good White girl might express exasperation at her father's racist language, not because she thought it was wrong, but because it made him (and, by extension, her) look ignorant, ill-bred, or low-class. In Moon's analysis, White women take up, resist, defer, and reject the good White girl position, which shows that a common culture cannot be theoretically imposed upon them *a priori*. Instead, research within this tradition attempts to map both the similarities and contradictions that are inherent in the negotiation of cultural practices.

A Discursive View of Politeness

The final concept that Brown and Levinson's theory relies upon is face. In their theory, politeness is viewed as the verbal strategies one uses to minimize the threat to another's face. Recent rereadings of Goffman's original essay have led scholars to argue that Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness is actually a theory of facework (Arundale, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003; Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003). Although a seemingly trivial matter, it raises several questions about Brown and Levinson's use of face as an *a priori* construct.

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[4] Although Brown and Levinson do address power in their theory, they conceptualize it as explicitly known and interpersonally negotiated. A critical view of power, in addition to their view, also understands power as diffuse and (often) unconsciously internalized (see Lukes, 1974).

Eelen (2001) and Watts (2003) argue that by using politeness and facework interchangeably, Brown and Levinson conflate what they call first-order politeness (i.e., politeness1) and second-order politeness (i.e., politeness2). Politeness1 is the "various ways in which polite behavior is talked about by members of sociocultural groups" (Eelen, 2001, p. 3). In other words, politeness1 is the insider's, native's, or emic understanding of politeness. On the other hand, politeness2 is "a more technical notion which can only have a value within an overall theory of social interaction" (Eelen, 2001, p. 4). This notion would be the researcher's, analyst's, or etic understanding of politeness. Face is not a culturally specific or emic way of talking about politeness; it is an abstracted account of an everyday form of communication. As Eelen (2001) points out, politeness2 conceptualizes politeness "as a unique and objective system that exists 'out there' in reality, that can be discovered, manipulated and examined just as a physical object can" (p. 179). Politeness is viewed as a measurable construct, rather than as a fluid and an intersubjective act.

Watts, Ide, and Ehlich (1992) argue that Brown and Levinson, and scholars utilizing their theory, have not really studied politeness1, but rather have studied a social science construct masquerading as politeness. Although they admit that studies on facework give some insight into politeness, they maintain that there is little hope that scholars can understand politeness until first- and second-order politeness is clearly delineated. The discursive approach abandons the quest for *a priori* conceptualization (and, concomitantly, the quest for predictive validity) in favor of understanding politeness as "intersubjectivity created and maintained between and thus also by (individual) human beings" (Eelen, 2001, p. 246).

The discursive approach's delineation between first- and second-order politeness would mean that face and facework should be the topics of investigation for postpositivist scholars. This suggests scholars informed by the discursive approach should study politeness (or its social-symbolic equivalent in other languages and cultures) as a social and linguistic act that emerges in everyday talk. For example, scholars would be interested in the ways that local communities "speak like" a polite person in the same way that scholars have looked at how to "speak like" a man (Philipsen, 1975). Brown and Levinson's theory, and scholarship that draws upon it, can and should continue to investigate how face is negotiated among interlocutors (see also Ting-Toomey, 1988). However, scholars should not conflate this type of research with the study of politeness1.

A Performative View of Politeness

A critical-performative view of politeness is necessary to encompass the three challenges to Brown and Levinson's theory. Breaking down the challenges provides a useful starting point to what constitutes a critical-performative view of politeness. A critical-performative view of politeness entails:

1)   An intersubjective understanding of human communication (i.e., interactional).
2)   A contested view of culture and cultural practices (i.e., critical).
3)   An emic approach to investigating communicative practices (i.e., discursive)

In addition to encompassing the three challenges, performativity also offers a unique contribution to a critical-performative understanding of politeness. Specifically, the concept of citationality challenges scholars to understand how politeness contributes to individuals' identity formation. In this section, we give

a brief outline of performativity before then showing how it can encompass the three challenges to Brown and Levinson's framework. We conclude the section by explaining how citationality enhances the theoretical scope of a performative view of politeness.

A Brief View of Performativity

The philosophy of performativity[5] draws upon a wide range of work including speech act theory, feminism, phenomenology, and postmodernism. In his germinal work, Austin (1975) radically challenges the notion that is communication is only a descriptive act. He argues that communication exerts force and change upon the world. This notion leads him to argue that, "what we have in study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation, there can hardly be any longer a possibility of not seeing that stating is performing an act" (Austin, 1975, p. 139). By distinguishing between *locutionary*, *illocutionary*, and *perlocutionary* speech acts, Austin helped differentiate saying as stating and saying as doing.

Butler (1988, 1990, 1997) builds upon Austin's (as well as Searle and Derrida's) insights to assert that the communicative act of labeling gender is not merely descriptive, rather it is a doing that accomplishes gender. She argues that speech acts regulate gender, establishing "a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time" (Butler, 1990, p. 34). Additionally, she uses Althusser and Foucault's insights into power and sexuality to assert that gender is constructed within a "matrix of compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 31). Gender constructions are not innocent or benign labels; they regulate the ways that people can express themselves. Moreover, these constructions reproduce the institutions that interpellate individuals into gender identity. The performance of gender is not a mask that hides a material fact; it is a political and discursive act—one that draws upon discourses within matrices of power to produce a particular gender identity.

Subsequently, communication scholars have extended Butler's performative understanding of gender to a wide range of contexts. Madison and Hamera (2006) describe performativity as "mannerisms, styles, and gestures . . . inherited from one generation to another though space and time and demarcated within specific identity categories" (p. xviii). They go on to say:

> Words are indeed performative, and they *do* have material effects. Obviously, words *do something in the world,* and they are reiterative (in terms of Derrida) in that speech, meaning, intent, and custom have been repeated through time and are therefore communicative and comprehensible because they are recognizable in their repetition. (p. xvi)

Their assertion suggests that performative frameworks are a way to understand how all communication serves to (re)produce all identities (not only gender) within discourses as well as creating a site for resistance and subversion. For example, Warren (2008) offers that the performance of Whiteness constitutes "White" as a racial category, perpetuating normative systems of racism, colonization, and oppression. He argues

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[5] We recognize that there are different ways of understanding performativity aside from Butler's iteration. However, we use "performativity" rather than "Butlarian performativity" for the sake of parsimony.

that to be "White" is not a biological fact; it is the result of a myriad of communicative choices. One performs Whiteness and, in return, is recognized as being White.

We argue politeness is a form of identity work, and although Brown and Levinson's framework is valuable for understanding identity work from an individual perspective, performative understandings of politeness relate specific practices of politeness to broader materializations of power. Here, we outline how a critical-performative understanding of politeness encompasses the three challenges to Brown and Levinson's framework and offer examples of what politeness norms do in terms of power relations in a particular culture.

The Four Components of a Performative View of Politeness

A performative understanding of politeness is interactional. Performative approaches to politeness reject its conceptualization as static practice, recognizing how people "creatively play, improvise, interpret, and re-present roles and scripts" (p. 187) surrounding politeness (Conquergood, 1991). Performativity is based upon an intersubjective understanding of communication and privileges a contextual understanding of communicative practices (Salih, 2004). Butler (1997) argues that injurious speech (e.g., hate speech) is not merely a matter of the words that are used. She writes that "no speech act *has* to perform injury" (p. 15) and therefore no list or standard can be posited *a priori* concerning the adjudication of taboo speech acts. Injurious speech can only be understood as an act of "condensed historicity" (p. 3), an act that is both a (re)inscription of past communicative acts and a (re)production of those injuries in the present moment.

Similarly, politeness is not best understood as simply the reconstruction of communicative intent, but rather as the negotiation of competing meanings between interlocutors within a historical trajectory. The negotiation of politeness "embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged" (Diamond, 1996, p. 1). Past iterations of politeness all constitute competing and sometimes contradictory understandings of what politeness entails. As Butler (1997) notes:

> If a performative provisionally succeeds . . . then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.* (p. 51, emphasis in original)

For example, individuals have viewed politeness as a moral virtue, as subterfuge, or as a social obligation (Terkourafi, 2011). Each of these competing understandings are pulled into the moment when individuals attempt to negotiate meaning surrounding the politeness of a particular communicative action.

A performative understanding of politeness is critical. Performativity is based upon the notion that identity, culture, and communication are sites of conflict. Bell (2008) explains, "The challenge for performance theory . . . is to explore micro-processes, subtleties in interactions, and productively positive ways that power operates in performance to create selves and communities" (p. 25). Butler (1990) argues the lack of connection between the signifier and the signified results in an "essential incompleteness" (p.

15). This incompleteness results in the creation and enforcement of an ideal (e.g., ideal femininity) that members within a society react to whether they try to emulate it or reject it, and thus the term "female" becomes a site of conflict.

A performative understanding maintains that politeness is one way that individuals come to know, perform, and produce their identities within matrices of power. Butler (1990) characterizes identities as the "resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life" (p. 145). Politeness is one type of rule bound discourse for individuals, promoting what is good, appropriate or desirable behavior and, concomitantly, what is a good, appropriate, or desirable identity. For example, the politeness ritual that men should hold the door open for women is both the product of past discourses that have constructed so-called biological sex as well as secures those demarcations by (re)producing the notion that women are weak, frail, and in need of male generosity. Furthermore, it (re)produces the identity of the "gentleman" by perpetuating masculinist iterations of male behavior (i.e., the active, protective, and genteel male). Politeness is a doing, one that serves to reproduce the desirability of some identity positions over others through everyday communicative interactions.

A performative understanding of politeness is emic. Emic views of politeness privilege the everyday body as a site of knowing and work to theorize the relationships among self, other, and culture. Shaffer, Allison, and Pelias (2014) explain that "the performing body acts as a cultural site that is both the product of culture and a vantage point for observing and critiquing culture" (p. 197). As such, a performative understanding of politeness focuses on the communicative practices and subsequent interpretations of those practices among participants. Scholarship informed by performativity in the communication discipline has long-valued emic investigations. Warren (2008) argues that a performative understanding of communication "could offer a way of seeing the reiteration (and effect) of power (in various manifestations) itself, a look at the reconstitution of a system of power (always shifting and always changing) and how that system perpetuates itself" (p. 303). Investigations informed by performativity privilege the analysis of everyday talk rather than imposing theoretical constructs onto individuals' communicative behaviors.

A performative understanding of politeness takes seriously the notion that how individuals understand and negotiate politeness provides insights into the sociocultural world they inhabit. Diamond (1996) states, "performance . . . is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated" (p. 5). In other words, it is the moment of doing politeness that demands scholars' examination and interrogation. If scholars come into the analysis with a set of preconceived constructs, it is all too possible that they will miss many of the nuances embedded in everyday talk.

Although an emic view of politeness focuses on individuals' everyday communicative behaviors, it does not rely solely upon participants' interpretations of politeness. To do so serves to "reify the lay perspective, elevating it to the status of theory" (Haugh, 2007, p. 311). Instead, a performative understanding of politeness grounds its analysis of politeness in the context in which the communicative behaviors were performed. Context, in this sense, is not deductively imposed upon the instances of talk, but is viewed as a coconstitutive element of individuals' communicative practices. A performative understanding of politeness thus generates a nuanced view of politeness by understanding the relationship between talk-context.

A performative understanding of politeness is citational. A performative understanding of politeness attempts to theorize the role it plays in the formation of the subject. Butler's notion of citationality is particularly helpful in this area. On one hand, citationality refers to how a communicative behavior draws upon (or cites) discourses so that meaning can be negotiated between individuals. Citationality, in this sense, is encompassed by the interactional understanding of politeness. Citationality also refers to the (re)production of those discourses in the moment that they are invoked. As Diamond (1996) eloquently offers, "as soon as performativity comes to rest on *a* performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotion and political effects, all become discussable" (p. 5). It is in this sense that citationality offers a unique element to understanding politeness: its role in identity formation.

The role of politeness in identity formation is perhaps the most intriguing and least understood component of studying politeness. It is here that Butler's (1988) oft-quoted phrase that gender is "stylized repetition of acts" (p. 519) is particularly relevant. When individuals attempt to perform politeness, it perpetuates the discursive system that delineates among polite, impolite, politic, and rude acts (see Watts, 2003). The citational component of a critical-performative understanding of politeness moves it from the realist ontology in current scholarship to a subdued ontology (see Schrag, 2003). A subdued ontology suggests that even though politeness cannot be said to exist "out there" like an object, there are "real effects, meanings solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real" (Diamond, 1996, p. 5). This framework invites scholars to investigate politeness as a doing that can be traced by the effects it has on the social world. In this sense, politeness is not just a collection of floating signifiers; it is an ongoing practice of articulating a collection of elements that regulate individuals based on the discourses of politeness.

One of the most important contributions of citationality to the study of politeness is that it brings to the fore the question: what is the relationship between politeness and discourses that perpetuate oppression? We will return to the example concerning men holding the door open for women. Could this promote sexism? Absolutely. Does it have to promote sexism? Butler (1997) would answer:

> To argue, on the one hand, that the offensive effect of such words is fully contextual, and that a shift of context can exacerbate or minimize that offensiveness, is still not to give an account of the power that such words are said to exercise. To claim, on the other hand, that some utterances are always offensive, regardless of context, that they carry their contexts with them in ways that are too difficult to shed, is still not to offer a way to understand how context is invoked and restaged at the moment of utterance. (p. 13)

In other words, there is not and cannot be a universal rule for what does (not) constitute polite communication. Citationality encourages an analysis of polite communication that foregrounds its historicity and situates it as a political and discursive act—helping navigate between a prescribed list of communicative behaviors (i.e., postpositivism) and the notion that politeness is a matter of individualistic evaluation (i.e., relativism). Politeness is a risky performance, and by living outside of its structures, one places "oneself at risk of death—sometimes actual death, but more frequently the social death of delegitimation and non-recognition" (Salih, 2004, p. 11). In other words, failing at politeness (like failing at gender) can invite repercussions ranging from social ostracism to bodily harm. As such, scholars should attempt to understand

the relationship between politeness and how it serves to regulate individuals into prescribed identities within matrices of power.

A Research Agenda for Critical-Performative Politeness Research

A critical-performative understanding of politeness necessitates a unique set of methodological tools. Rather than starting with a list of *a priori* politeness strategies that are deductively used to analyze talk across contexts (e.g., bald-on-record, negative and positive face, or off-record strategies, see Brown & Levinson, 1978), a critical performative theory invites a specific, inductive, and emic approach to social interaction. As such, it uses "the body" as its analytic starting point, bringing attention to how bodies can be studied as sites of experiential and cognitive knowledge, where behaviors and the values associated with them are inscribed by historical circumstances, and, in turn, upheld, resisted, subverted, or deferred. By beginning with the body, a critical-performative research agenda examines bodies doing politeness in a particular time and place. The critical-performative researcher investigates politeness at both the "micropolitical level of everyday life and at the macropolitical level of social structures, material practices, and cultural norms" (May, 2015, p. 5). We believe ethnography, particularly when conducted from a critical-performative perspective, offers a set of methodological tools that scholars can use to account for the local, emergent, and discursive elements of politeness. In the following section, we explain how a performative approach to ethnography provides an ideal set of analytical tools for understandings of politeness.

Ethnography as Critical-Performative Methodology

By listening to and observing communication practices, interviewing participants, collecting cultural artifacts, and taking part in the daily lives of those being studied, ethnography emphasizes an emic or culturally specific approach to understanding communication interactions. Ellis (2004) takes the word *ethnography* apart:

> *Ethno* means people or culture; *graphy* mean writing or describing. Ethnography then means writing about or describing people and culture, using firsthand observation and participation in a setting or situation. The term refers both to the process of doing to a study and to the written product. (p. 26)

As a type of research committed to entering the worlds of other people to understand and locate meaning, ethnography is an appropriate method for gaining insight into how politeness is performed.

Ethnography requires a deep commitment to field research that focuses on the study of people communicating in their daily lives. By using ethnography to study politeness, critical-performative researchers work to understand politeness as it unfolds in interactions verbally and nonverbally. Conquergood (1991) explains that firsthand participation in a culture via ethnography "privileges the body as a site of knowing" and focuses on "the processes of communication that constitute the 'doing' of ethnography: speaking, listening, and acting together" (p. 181). Jones (2006) supports this view, stating, "Performance ethnography rests on the idea that bodies harbor knowledge about culture, and that performance allows for the exchange of that knowledge across bodies" (p. 339). As politeness is performed,

information about individuals, their relationship, cultural norms, and power structures are being exchanged. Through ethnography, critical-performative researchers can begin to understand the exchange of knowledge that occurs across bodies as politeness is performed.

Not only does ethnography focus on communication practices as they occur among individuals to shows how individuals make sense of their social worlds, it situates individuals' everyday talk within the broader sociohistorical landscape upon which it is performed. Ethnography, particularly when practiced from a critical-performative perspective, emphasizes embodiment, which "is political; a stance is already implied through the sociopolitical narratives embedded in bodies" (Jones, 2006, p. 343). In other words, ethnography tends to the various and complex intersectional identities present in any given interaction as well as the broader discourses at work in the situation.

Unlike postpositivist approaches to politeness, which assume universal rules for politeness exist (e.g., social distance [speaker ⇔ listener] + power difference [speaker ⇔ listener] + rank of imposition = weight of face threatening act, see Brown & Levinson, 1978), a critical-performative framework of politeness uses ethnographic methods to obtain an emic understanding of politeness1 to articulate the links between communication and culture. Take, as a case example, the recent altercation between Michael Dunn, a White male, who initiated a confrontation with Jordan Davis and his friends, all African American males, over his belief that their vehicle's music was too loud at a gas station. Dunn, who was in the car with his fiancée, stated, "I hate that thug music," and proceeded to tell Davis and his friends to turn off their radio. After a brief verbal quarrel, Dunn retrieved his handgun from his vehicle and shot at Jordan Davis and his friends ten times, continuing to fire as they left the gas station, killing Davis (Walsh, 2014).

A traditional postpositivist approach is interested in providing insights into what is effective request-making or compliance-gaining strategies (i.e., how to politely ask for the music to be turned down) that, in many ways, underrepresents the depth and seriousness of the situation. Within this framework, one might interpret the event as follows: First, Davis and his friends were engaged in a behavior Dunn found disagreeable. Next, Dunn engaged in request-making and compliance-gaining strategies to induce David and his friends to change their behavior. Dunn misinterpreted the situation and, as a result, used a request-making strategy that was inappropriate for the situation (i.e., he did not obtain the intended response). The shooting and subsequent fatality are, at best, an addendum to the analysis and, likely, simply erased from the report because it does not fit into the *a priori* list of strategies that can be deductively used.

A critical-performative theory of politeness views the Dunn-Davis situation as a citation of interactional, critical, emic, and embodied elements of communication. Rejecting universal rules for politeness, a critical-performative approach uses "the body" as its analytic starting point, recognizing that Dunn, Davis, and his friends' bodies engage in behaviors inscribed with values bound by historical circumstances. Dunn's description of their music as "thug music" (and, by extension, framing Davis and his friends as thugs), serves as a citation of discursive binary between White and Black, civilized and savage, which animates the historical legacy of White supremacy (Leonardo, 2009). Thugs, by definition are not— indeed, cannot be—polite; rather, they are subhuman, outside of the bounds of the rational, orderly, and hierarchical structure of Whiteness. The discursive system of Whiteness informs Dunn's conflation of personal preference for volume with his ascriptions about Black youth and, ultimately, provides the cultural

reasoning that justifies his use of lethal force. That is, Dunn's shooting of Davis can be best understood not as a disagreement about the volume of the music or as Dunn's failure to obtain his communicative goal in his request; rather, it can be read as the citation of a racialized system that always already conceptualizes Black bodies as unruly, uncivilized, and aggressive (i.e., "thugs") and using force (in this case, lethal force) to secure the boundaries of Whiteness-informed politeness.

Dunn's preference for the volume of the music is more than just a personal idiosyncrasy. Indeed, the blackness of Davis and his friends and the whiteness of Dunn matters and any understanding of politeness in this situation must account for the historicity of these particular bodies in a society where the murder of Black people for the most trivial of acts—from asking for help after a car crash (Peralta, 2014) to walking into stores with toys (Chittal, 2014)—inform the communicative negotiation of politeness. In other words, understanding politeness is important because these bodies, at this historic moment, and in this context, matter. Critical-performative politeness researchers should use ethnographic methods to understand and challenge the discursive systems that give rise to and animate the local, performative accomplishment of politeness in systems of power (including racism, but also hetero/sexism, disability, class, and so on). In doing so, scholars would be able to show how the communicative act of politeness serves as a citation of systems of intersubjective meanings, articulated by the history and context of the hegemonic norms of society, infused with the local norms of a population, and embodied within interlocutors.

Conclusion

The critical-performative understanding of politeness offers a way for scholars to see politeness as a culturally thick and power-laden practice—one that locally negotiated while drawing upon the past and projecting into the future. Although this article provides an alternative to postpositive research of politeness, there remains a considerable amount of work to be done. Our framework encourages critically-minded scholars to understand the relationship among politeness, oppression, and resistance. Although "politeness norms make sure that those in powerful positions receive due respect and deference" (Eelen, 2001, p. 200), critical scholars might not find it productive to view politeness as always already inimical to social justice. For example, Scott's (1990) analysis of the resistance tactics of 19th-century U.S. slaves shows how politeness can be used to resist domination. He states:

> We are in danger of missing much of their significance if we see linguistic deference and gestures of subordination merely as performances extracted by power. The fact is they serve also as a barrier and a veil that the dominant find difficult or impossible to penetrate. (p. 32)

As Giroux (1988) argues, critical scholarship must move beyond the language of critique to encompass possibility, hope, and renewal. A critical-performative understanding of politeness "holds out the possibility of a disruption of [its] univocal posturing" (Butler, 1990, p. 32). In other words, our framework encourages scholars to be careful in their analyses, nuanced in their write-ups, and reflexive in our approaches to studying politeness. Ultimately, we believe that such a view has the potential to radically change the current trajectory of politeness research and broaden our discipline's conversations about the relationship among politeness, identity, and power.

A critical-performative approach to politeness rejects it as a universal norm (e.g., these communication strategies are polite) or a state of being (e.g., she is a polite person) as these understandings reify politeness and puts it beyond the scope of critical interrogation. Only by acknowledging its inherent contestability can researchers interrogate those features of politeness that perpetuate dehumanization and hierarchy. Thus, the critical components within a performance view of politeness encourages scholars to find agency "within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (Butler, 1990, p. 145). In short, a critical-performative approach is rooted in the belief that scholars' work in this area can encourage liberatory, utopic imagining while challenging those features that perpetuate oppression.

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