

# Politeness

[19-4-2004]

German characteristics were discussed..the less happy ones: insensitivity, self-obsession, a strong inclination to self-pity and a longing to be liked. Others mentioned were: *angst*, aggressiveness, assertiveness, bullying, egotism, inferiority complex, sentimentality.

From a confidential memorandum of a private cabinet meeting on 24 March 1990, called by Mrs Thatcher and Douglas Hurd, Foreign Secretary, to discuss German reunification. It was written by Charles Powell, the Prime Minister's private secretary.

## 1. Manners

In Britain people still tend to judge others according to how they behave. People may be said to have no manners if they yawn without putting their hand in front of their mouth or speak rudely to somebody. On the other hand, a person who is polite and courteous, who is considerate towards other people, who says little about their own achievements and who respects the privacy of others, is much more likely to meet with approval and respect.

## 2. Please and thank you

*Please* is the magic word and is used in many situations, e.g. when you ask for something in a shop, or for help, a favour or some information. *Thank you* are the other very important words. In a shop many British people say *thank you* several times at the check-out, e.g. when the operator tells them the total cost of their goods, when he or she gives them their change or gives back their credit card, and sometimes again before they leave.

After receiving a present it is good manners to say *thank you* and sound pleased. Some people add a specific comment ("That's great, I have always wanted to read Shakespeare but never got round to it"). When a present is sent by mail it is polite to send a thank-you note, a short letter or card to thank the person who sent it and tell them how much you like it. It is also polite to write and say *thank you* after you have been invited out for a meal (or to someone's home) or been to stay with somebody.

cf . G. Smith, *The English companion*, p.233

## 3. Table manners

At table, it is bad manners to take a lot of food all at once, or to take more until it is offered. It is also considered good behaviour to ask somebody to pass the salt, etc rather than to reach across the table for it.

When invited to a meal at somebody's house people often take a bottle of wine or a box of chocolates or flowers, as a gift. Apart from this, it is not usual to give presents to people you do not know well. It is not considered polite to look round other people's houses without being invited to do so, and people usually ask where the toilet is rather than going to look for it. Many people do not smoke and visitors should ask permission before they smoke.

## 4. Formal and informal manners

It is friendly as well as polite to say *hello* or *good morning* to somebody you meet, to say *please* and *thank you* to family and friends as well as to strangers, and to apologise if you hurt or upset somebody. A warm tone of voice and a smile are also 35 important.

People usually shake hands when they are introduced to somebody for the first time but, except in business, rarely do so when they meet again. Nowadays, unless there is a great age difference, most adults use each other's first names straightaway.

People are expected to arrive on time for both business and social events and it is considered bad manners to be late or not to telephone to let people know if you are 40 delayed.

Formal manners are part of the British stereotype – they were said to make polite conversation but otherwise remain distant. They were famous for keeping a stiff upper lip (= not showing one's feelings in public) and not washing one's dirty linen (= talking about personal matters) in public. Nowadays few people stand on ceremony 45 (= behave formally) and even in formal situations (e.g. official dinners and receptions) most people are friendly and relaxed and concerned to be good company and put others at their ease.

From: "Manners", in J. Crowther ed., *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*, Oxford 1999, p. 330

## 5. Greetings

Some German students make a point of heading off in the opposite direction when they see professors and others are very good at pretending not to see them. Others again turn dumb when they find themselves in the same lift as a professor.

If you do not want to be noticed by your professors, that is the right behaviour to adopt.

But remember: Basic politeness requires one to acknowledge the existence of other people, and silence is considered extremely embarrassing in English-speaking countries. Another commonly observed maxim is "Do as you would be done by". This means that one should greet people and they in their turn should return the greeting.

These days, (*Good*) *morning/afternoon/evening* are quite common, while the most usual greeting is *hello*, while *hi* is more familiar. These can also be used when you are introduced to a third party, where phrases like *Nice/Pleased to meet you* can also be used. When the other person uses *How do you do?* you can reply by using the same formula, which is fairly rare and formal.

It is also quite usual to add on a How-are-you, as in

informal      - Hi, John, how're you doing?  
                  - I'm fine, thanks. How's yourself?

in a            - Morning, Claudia. Ho'ws life? See you in class.  
hurry         - Morning. Bye.

- neutral
- Good morning, Mr Pätzold
  - Good morning, Claudia. How's life?
  - Can't complain. How are you yourself?
  - I'm fine thanks. Have a nice day. Bye.
  - Thanks, and you.

**6. Privacy** is a very important character trait of many British people, compare the expressions *she is a very private person* and *my home is my castle* –that is, my home is the place where I can be private, feel safe and can do what I want. Do not be misled by the British gutter press which preys on celebrities in a disgusting way and reveals everything.

**Check on Availability** To address sb, other than a ritual greeting, is considered an invasion of his privacy in many circumstances and therefore needs an excuse. I have heard a young American ask an Englishman on a train "Are you available for conversation?" And only then, when he got the answer yes, did he start up a conversation.

Invasions of privacy are often apologized for in advance, for instance when you want to talk to a stranger or social superior (such as one of your professors), particularly on the phone. You should certainly not walk up to a person and say "I have a question", as most Bielefeld students tend to do. English native speakers feel quite differently about this.

A commonly used phrase is: "Excuse me..." Other common phrases used to establish somebody's readiness to talk to you are:

- Is this a good moment?
- Am I disturbing you?
- May I disturb you for a moment?
- I hope I'm not disturbing/interrupting you?
- Have you got a minute/moment?
- I wonder if you could spare me a few moments?

## 7. Thanks and Apologies.

For thanks see also above, section 1. Note that is quite common to mention the reason for the thank you – which makes the thank you a little longer, and therefore more polite.

### Thanks

Examples are :

- Can I get you a drink? – Thank you. No thank you//
- Many thanks for your help.
- Thanks for bringing the suitcase by . - No problem
- Thank you again for agreeing to come with me on such short notice.
- Thanks for having me. The hot tea did a lot of good, and the cake was delicious.

- I've enjoyed our talk. - Thanks for the tea. I've enjoyed myself too. I hope we meet again. – So do I.
- (written, letter ending) With my best wishes and again my thanks for having let me see your latest work.
- (written, formal; literary editor to young write) Dear Miss Talis, Thank you for sending us *Two Figures by a Fountain*, and please accept our apologies for this dilatory response.

## Apologies

Apologies are as usual and normative in polite behaviour as are thank yous. As with thank yous, the rule is that the greater the offense taken the more elaborate and intensive the apology should be.

Examples:

Yes I'm afraid I did- what must you be thinking of me – I'm sorry

I'm awfully/terribly sorry – how stupid of me

I'm so sorry – I really don't know what to say, honestly

I just didn't realise – I'm ever so sorry

I'm really/ terribly sorry – I honestly didn't mean to hurt your feelings

I'm really sorry – I promise you it won't happen again. - Never mind/No problem/Not to worry.

- Simon Dukes? – Yes ? – I'm sorry to interrupt --- -It's OK, I was just...

- Two minutes late. – Sorry, I had a cramp// - Thirty minutes late again, Holger. What was it this time? – I'm sorry, my train was late.

Apologies are often repeated at the end of a (part of a) conversation.

Apologies are also used to tone down something unpleasant or unexpected in the immediate future, as in these examples:

I'm afraid/sorry, but I can't agree with you there.

I'm sorry but (I'm afraid) I have to go now.

I'm afraid you have lost me/Sorry, what did you say?

The words *pardon* or *I beg your pardon?* can also be used when you fail to hear something properly, as can *what?* but this is considered impolite by many people although often used by some working-class and upper-class people.

An example from a phone conversation in a novel: "Can you hear me? Bit of a bad connection, I'm afraid. Can you hear me?"

This is an extended example from a contemporary US American novel, which illustrates some of the points I have made so far:

### Men and Women - The art of polite requests and even politer refusals

He waits near the gate where the guard sits. He'll start off with a compliment if she does walk past this gate. The words will come. Her smiles before were sure signs. All he can do is try. All she can be is polite and say thanks. And then, if nobody else is around. But of course other people will be around. She's the lead. She might walk out 5 with an entourage. Even if there are other people around, though not if she's on the arm of a man or with a man she obviously cares for very much, he'll say "I realize, Miss Lardo," - this will be after his opening compliment about her singing - "

you must be extremely busy and all ... and maybe what I'm about to say will sound presumptuous if not even improper to you ... but I was wondering if you wouldn't like 10 to have an iced tea with me or even a hot tea or coffee or some cold sangria at the park's fountain café; which is barely a five minute walk from here." All she can do is say yes or no or she'd like to but no thanks or thanks for the invitation but she's quite tired or busy or not feeling so well or has a previous engagement or has to see her designer about tonight's dress or go to a hall to rehearse next week's opera or to 15 her agent's about her European tour or she really must go, run, hurry, sorry, but thanks nevertheless. She might even say "Maybe some other time."

## 8. The Importance of Small Talk

a. The thing I loved most about the restaurant was the small talk. People bantered and smiled, thanked you, made polite requests, chatted about earlier visits or the weather or where they were headed. It went on and on, day and night, pleasant and meant to create pleasantness...for me it was like a tune playing in my head, and the phrases I produced – "What may I bring you?" "Will that be all?" "Thanks for stopping, come in again" – were me picking up my part of the harmony.

From: Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*, New York 1991, pp. 333-4

## 9. Successful Conversation and small talk.

In conversation and in small talk especially, it is important to pick up on, and develop, what the other person says (so as to create a conversational chain – this is called **chaining**). Often the continuation is more emphatic, goes one better than the original statement (this is called **topping**). Students should pay conscious attention to these two aspects because they make for pleasant and successful social interaction.

This is how two linguists put it:

Reciprocation [i.e in small talk] is socially normative. The two social maxims in operation are...

**"When you receive a free social good, reciprocate!"**

and

**"When a free social good is Requested, give more than is asked for!"**

Example:

A: Lovely weather [clearly meant ironically]

B: Goddam awful isn't it

A: Terrible – trust my car to break down yesterday

B: I never bother taking the car to work nowadays – too much traffic

A: Pretty hectic isn't it

B: Awful – you going into London?

A: No – I work in Chelmsford

B: Ah – that's a reasonable journey

A: Takes about forty minutes usually – in the car

B: Aha – well here comes the train

A: Right

From: Edmondson and House, *Let's Talk and Talk About It*, p. 223-5

**To complement the initial quotation, here is an American view of the Germans.**

### Rules for Dealing with Germans

Everyone is not alike!

1. Remember that Germans really hate rule breakers!
2. Germans and Americans do *not* think and act alike in social and business situations – especially in first encounters. Get over the myth that "we're all basically alike." It sounds good, but this mind-set is counterproductive.
3. Germans tend to be blunt, frank, and – to Anglo-American eyes – tactless in certain situations. They tend to correct you when you don't want to be corrected. That's because they are primarily concerned with exchanging facts and information, not "warm fuzziness." Since they also do this with other Germans, try to understand that you have not been singled out for special treatment.
4. Germans aren't into "idle chatter." They don't really care if you "have a nice day" (an expression they view as a symbol of American "superficiality"), and they don't want to talk about (a) their jobs, (b) their kids or family, or (c) the weather with a stranger (i.e., anyone they haven't known for at least a year or more.) Such conversation is reserved for close friends.
5. Both the German language and the Germans draw a clear line between *Freunde (du/ihr)* and *Bekannte (Sie)*, between private (home) and public (work). You are a *Bekannte(r)* ("acquaintance") and on *Sie* terms until your German counterpart says otherwise. This is one of the most difficult rules for easy-going, just-call-me-Bob Americans to truly grasp and internalize.
6. Germans have been known to smile, but unnecessary smiling is frowned on. A German needs a good reason to smile. In fact, excessive smiling for most Europeans is an indication of weak-mindedness. Don't overdo smiling around Germans. At heart Germans are pessimists, and they enjoy their pessimism\*...Corollary to Rule 6: Never try to tell a joke in German. Leave this to Harald Schmidt or Germans who have had too much to drink.
7. Learn and accept Rules 1 through 6. Don't think you can (or should) change people. Learn to adjust to *them*, rather than expecting them to adjust to you!

There are a few Germans who don't fit the preceding rules, but all six of them are now living in the United States or Canada.

From: Hyde Flippo, *When in Germany, Do AS THE GERMANS DO*, Chicago etc 2002, p. 32

\* Cf. also this quote from the novel of an Indian-Canadian writer:  
'God is dead,' said Maneck. 'That' s what a German philosopher wrote.' She was shocked. 'Trust the Germans to say such things,' she frowned.  
From : R. Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, London 1996

# Politeness Exercises

## 1. The correct form of address

Choose the correct form from the choices below.

- a. When you go to see a doctor, you greet her with these words:  
Hello, **Mrs Doctor/Doctor Smith/Mrs Doctor Smith.**
- b. When you begin a letter with "Dear Mr Peterson", you should end it with  
**Yours sincerely/Yours faithfully/Yours always.**
- c. When you are a student talking to a professor, you should address her as  
**Professor Martin/Professor Dr Martin/Mrs Dr Martin.**
- d. When you write a letter to a married woman you do not know, you should use  
this form of address: **Mrs Bruce Reynolds/Mrs Alice Reynolds/Ms Alice  
Reynolds.**

## 2. The next step

Match the phrases in the left column with an appropriate response in the right-hand column.

a. How do you do?	1. Oh, hi. I'm Alice.
b. How are you?	2. Oh, let me introduce myself. I'm Jane Hawkins.
c. Nice to meet you.	3. How do you do?
d. I don't believe I've had the pleasure	4. You too
e. Haven't we met before?	5. Fine, thanks. And how are you today?
f. Hi, I'm Andrew.	6. Yes, I think it was at last year's meeting

## 3. Longer responses

A German example overheard 2 weeks ago:

English native speaker: Na, wie geht's?

German native speaker: Danke. [pause]

Eng nat speaker : Danke gut oder danke schlecht?

Politeness is often a matter of saying more than a mere "yes" or "no". Put together appropriate responses from columns A and B that can go with the initial phrases:

- a. Could you hand me the transparency over there?
- b. Thank you very much for your help.
- c. Would you like a drink?
- d. Here's the pointer you asked for.
- e. I'm so sorry for being late.

Column A	Column B
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I Certainly -	I I appreciate it
II Don't worry about it-	II it was my pleasure
III Don't mention it -	III here you are
IV Oh, thanks for remembering -	IV I'd love one
V Yes, thanks -	V no harm done

#### 4. Asking for information

You are studying on an exchange at a British university. You are looking for one of your new friends, an English girl called Jane, and ask the members of your English literature class. Choose the correct verb for each blank from this list:

got- happen – wonder- would – wouldn't

- Excuse me, do you \_\_\_\_\_ to know where I could find Jana?
- You \_\_\_\_\_ by any chance know where Jane is?
- Sorry to bother you, but have you \_\_\_\_\_ any idea where Jane is?
- I \_\_\_\_\_ if you could tell me where Jana is.
- You wouldn't be able to tell me where Jana is, \_\_\_\_\_ you?

#### 5. Asking favours

Insert the correct form of the verb into the requests below.

- Would you mind \_\_\_\_\_ (help) with this overhead?
- Would it be all right if I \_\_\_\_\_ (come) a little later to class ?
- Could you do me a favour and \_\_\_\_\_ (pass) it on to Peter ?
- Could I ask you \_\_\_\_\_ (come to) the meeting with me?
- I \_\_\_\_\_ (wonder) whether you might be able to collect Professor Johnson from the airport.

#### 6. Offers

Circle the correct form to complete these sentences.

- No problem. **I email /I'll email/ I'm emailing** you my talk right away.
- No, please – **I pay/I'm prepared to pay/let me pay** for the drink.
- I'd be prepared/I'd be glad/I'd be sure** to collect Professor Johnson from the airport.

- d. **Do/Don't/ Would** you like some tea?
- e. **Can/Do/Should** I offer you some water before you start your talk?
- f. **May/Should/Will** I help you with this heavy bag?

**7. Unscramble these sentences to form typical phrases.**

- a. A/ afternoon/ appreciate/ chat/ could/ have/ I/ if/ it/ quiet/ this/ we/ would.
- b. Afraid/ at/ I'm/ is/ moment/ Professor Johnson/ the/ unavailable.
- c. Any/ contact/ don't/ further/ have/ hesitate/ if/ me/ please/ questions/ to/ you.
- d. Afternoon/ do/ happen/ know/ session/ starts/ the/ to/ when/ you?
- e. Am/ around/ don't/ either/ here/I/ I/ know/ my/ sorry/ way.

**8. Saying No Politely**

Tick the correct form from the choices offered.

- a. How do you turn down an invitation to dinner?
  - 1. I'm afraid I won't come to the dinner.
  - 2. Thank you, but I'm afraid I won't be able to come
  - 3. I'm afraid, but I will be unable to come.
- b. You are offered a delicious looking dessert but you have eaten enough. How do you turn down without giving offense?
  - 1. Thank you, I've had enough.
  - 2. No, thank you. I'm fine.
  - 3. Thanks but no thanks – I'm trying to watch my weight.
- c. Someone lights a cigarette but you are in a no-smoking area. How do you react?
  - 1. Smoking is forbidden here.
  - 2. Can't you see the no-smoking sign?
  - 3. I'm afraid this is a no-smoking area.
- d. You are asked to come out on a late night pubcrawl. You are exhausted. What do you say?
  - 1. I am really sorry, but I couldn't come.
  - 2. That won't be possible for me, I'm afraid.
  - 3. I do have a class first thing tomorrow morning, you know.

## 9. Apologizing

Choose the correct form from the choices offered.

- a. I'm **completely/terribly/thoroughly** sorry.
- b. Please **take/believe/accept** my apologies.
- c. I **do/should/will** apologize for my mistake.
- d. **I am regretting/I regret/I am regretful** that the mistake has occurred.
- e. Please **excuse/forgive/forget** this regrettable oversight.

## 10. Find appropriate ways to continue these beginnings :

- a. Can you ....
- b. I wonder whether you...
- c. Could you possibly...
- d. I'm afraid I...
- e. I was wondering...
- f. Would you mind ...
- g. Is it all right if ...
- h. Would you like...
- i. Excuse me, could you perhaps

## 11. Find possible phrases that can come before the expressions below.

- a. Don't mention it.
- b. That's all right.
- c. No problem.
- d. Any time.
- e. It's a/ My pleasure.
- f. You bet!
- g. Pleased to meet you.
- h. I'm fine, thanks.

## 12. Change these blunt statements into something more acceptable.

- a. That's inconvenient, I don't want to meet you just yet.

- b. Our office is no use at all.
- c. This is far too slow
- d. That suggestion is ridiculous.
- e. Last term's feedback was bad.
- f. Next Tuesday is out of the question.
- g. That's completely impossible.
- h. I refuse to believe that.
- i. That's a narrow way of looking at the problem.
- j. She's totally unreliable.
- k. I don't like that at all.
- l. I have to leave now.
- m. - I want to hire you. – No. I don't do that sort of work
- n. (- I was hoping to see you. Tonight perhaps?) – No, I can't make it tonight.

### 13. Translate into English.

1.
  - Darf ich vorstellen, das ist Herr Professor Dr. Smith.
  - Angenehm/Es freut mich ihre Bekanntschaft zu machen.
  - Ganz meinerseits.
2.
  - Ja, also das ist Ian aus Worcester, der studiert hier ein Jahr.
  - Hello, Ian.
  - Hello, Julia.
3.
  - Guten Tag, Herr Doktor Müller. Hatten Sie eine gute Fahrt? Bitte legen Sie doch ab.
  - Danke der Nachfrage, die Staus waren erträglich. Hier an der Garderobe?
  - Genau. Kann ich Ihnen einen Tee/Kaffee anbieten?
  - Machen Sie bitte keine Umstände, ich habe schon auf der Raststätte Gütersloh einen Kaffee getrunken, der übrigens gar nicht schlecht war,
  - Gut, dann nehmen Sie doch bitte Platz, Herr Direktor Schmitt wird gleich kommen.
4.
  - Bleiching & Co, Sie sprechen mit Frau Schulze.
  - Ja, hier ist Schmitz, Peter Schmitz.
  - Wer ist da bitte?
  - Peter Schmitz, Köln. Ich habe heute ein Vorstellungsgespräch bei Ihnen , stecke aber mitten im Stau und werde sicher nicht vor dreiviertel 11 bei Ihnen sein können. Es tut mir sehr leid aber..
  - Ja, dafür können Sie ja nichts. Wir werden dann erst einen anderen Bewerber interviewen. Also dann bis nachher, Herr Schmitz.
5.
  - Tut mir schrecklich leid, es soll auch nicht wieder vorkommen . – Schon gut, das kann ja jedem passieren.