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Politeness as collective facework: the case of Swedish Jante Law

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Abstract

Politeness rituals can be understood as socially facilitative, performative speech acts that operate at the meso-level of Goffmanian interaction order, translating macro-level cultural scripts into micro-social action. Whereas previous research has focused on individual face-saving, this article examines the implications of politeness for the group face of speech communities, demonstrating the concept of collective facework. Taking Swedish culture as an example, I observe a tension between two sets of rules: the Nordic code of Jante Law, which frowns upon boasting and encourages humility, and the values of honesty and conversational directness. This is dramaturgically resolved through polite forms of talk, such as strategic reticence and sanctioning verbal domination. These interaction rituals perform collective facework to address negative and positive collective face needs.

Keywords: politeness, identity, interaction, facework, Sweden, Jante Law
Introduction

Politeness is a complex form of social behaviour that has been theorised across the disciplines of linguistics, pragmatics, philosophy, psychology and sociology. Despite lacking a clear and unified definition, encompassing aspects of etiquette, appropriateness, deference and mere conventionality (Meier 1995), a recurring theme is that politeness serves important social functions as a mechanism of cohesion. This resonates with classic sociological theories of both macro-level social solidarity (Durkheim 1898) and micro-level dramaturgical self-presentation (Goffman 1959). Through the ritualised, symbolic display of mutual respect, actors demonstrate their orientation to both the structurally framing ‘hardware’ of status hierarchy and the phenomenological ‘software’ of tacit and assumptive knowledge embedded in the fabric of everyday life (Schütz 1972).

Yet somewhere in between, at the meso-level of culturally regulated patterns of social conduct, another interpretation has been overlooked. The interaction order (Goffman 1983a) is an intermediate realm of shared norms and values: a moral and institutional structure (Heritage and Clayman 2010) that transcends the particularities of immediate situational demands and individual actors’ motives. Patterns and commonalities can be found across expressive contexts, revealing an underlying vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940): a generative grammar that guides social behaviour and makes everyday speech understandable (Zetterberg 2006). Such forms of interaction bridge the gulf between society and selfhood, indexing background repertoires of cultural rules and resources and translating these into symbolically meaningful action (Blumer 1969). As Norton (2014) argues, ‘culture-in-action’ can be understood as a structural system of meanings and mechanisms, which actors interpret and performatively laminate onto contextual situations. Moreover, the dynamism and complexity of these processes suggest that the meso-level involves conflict as well as consensus. Radical interactionism (Athens 2007) emphasises the centrality of dominance and power to the interaction order, albeit often symbolic, gestural and subtly negotiated.

This article explores the significance of politeness to the interaction order through the study of Jante Law, an informal code of conduct recognised by the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Jante Law expresses disapproval of self-promotional boasting and encourages modest humility. While this might be
expected to translate into classically polite behaviour involving deference and indirectness, it is complicated by a conflicting set of values advocating equality, honesty and conversational directness. This contradiction is particularly apparent in the case of Sweden, simultaneously regarded as the most polite and formal, yet most ruthlessly egalitarian, of all the Nordic cultures (Booth 2014). This suggests an ambivalent attitude to power: on the one hand, actors display respect for super- and subordinate relationships, but on the other hand, they avoid explicit domination. The interaction rituals used to express politeness therefore employ subtler gestures of symbolic power, negotiated through tacit consensus. Using Symbolic Interactionist theories (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1959) and qualitative interview data, I consider how Swedish people make sense of this dramaturgical dilemma and account for its management, through the performance of collective facework rituals (Rossing and Scott 2014).

**Politeness as performative social action**

Since the ‘discursive turn’, theories of politeness have shown greater recognition of its social context (Kádár and Haugh 2013), at the micro-level of analysis. The focus has shifted away from the cognitive design of speech to its pragmatic interpretation, social use and consequences. Influenced by ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and conversation analysis (Sacks 1992; Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), discursive social psychologists emphasise the importance of studying lay understandings of politeness and its negotiated co-construction within naturally occurring talk-in-interaction (Potter and Wetherell 1983; Holtgraves 2002).

Polite forms of talk contribute to ‘phatic communion’, or social bonding (Meltzer and Musolf 2000). This requires mutual perspective-taking (Clarke 1992), or taking the role of the other (Mead 1934), as actors draw upon common stocks of background knowledge in pursuit of intersubjective agreement (Schütz 1972). The common ground between participants is interactively negotiated and jointly accomplished (Clarke, ibid.). For example, Relevance Theory (Watts 2003) focuses on the inferential and interpretive work that people do when processing conversational speech and evaluating its (im-)politeness. ‘Politic behaviour’ occurs when participants define subject matter
as being relevant and appropriate to a situated encounter (Watts 2003:20). This can be understood as a social act (Mead 1922, 1934, 1938): a pragmatic negotiation of symbolic meaning, whereby actors take into account each other’s attitudes towards referential objects. In Symbolic Interactionism, Blumer (1969) similarly used the term ‘joint action’ to describe such harmonious, co-operative conduct.

This contrasts with earlier research in linguistics and pragmatics, which had proposed second order analytic models and typologies of polite speech: identifying its phonetic, syntactic and grammatical features, in abstraction from the first order meanings that these hold for interlocutors (Watts 2003). For example, Grice’s (1975) conversational maxim theory presupposed that people were consensus-seeking, logical and rational in designing the most efficient means of exchanging information. A Cooperative Principle (CP) led them to be relevant in content, clear in manner, appropriate in quantity and truthful in quality. Grice’s model was criticised for underestimating the complexity and ‘messiness’ of everyday conversation, wherein people regularly flout felicity conditions (Austin 1962) in order to show tact, diplomacy or concern for others. Natural talk is often imperfectly formed, indirectly targeted, ambiguous in meaning and open to interpretation. Fraser’s (1990) conversational contract theory emphasised the negotiated character of everyday talk, wherein roles and meanings are co-constructed by actors, and audience reception and (mis-)interpretation are as important as performative intention.

Leech (1983) then augmented Grice’s model with an additional Politeness Principle (PP), whereby social goals and motives may supercede the value of linguistic parsimony. Leech argued that an interpersonal rhetoric operated alongside the textual rhetoric, invoking socially-oriented maxims of tact, generosity, modesty, approbation, agreement and sympathy. Adhering to the PP rather than the CP led speakers to use strategies like minimising expressions that were unfavourable to hearers and maximising those that were favourable. Accommodation theory (Giles and Coupland 1981) suggests that people unconsciously alter their speech tone and style to match their interlocutors, in order to create social solidarity. For example, Lakoff (1973) suggested three sub-maxims that guide polite talk: minimise impositions on the hearer, give options and alternatives for their response, and offer a ‘feel good’ gesture of appreciation.
Speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1975) revealed the power of words to perform social actions or accomplish tasks in interaction. Austin made a distinction between a sentence’s locutionary force (the information conveyed through manifest content and syntactic configuration), illocutionary action (what the speaker intended it to do) and perlocutionary effects (what is actually does to persons or situations). Symbolic Interactionists build upon this by considering how such ‘performative utterances’ help actors to accomplish tasks of self-presentation and social identity work (Goffman 1959; Scott 2015). Polite verbalisations, such as apologies, requests and disclaimers, can be read as ‘aligning actions’, which not only display regret, embarrassment and so on, but also, in so doing, demonstrate the actor’s wider compliance with social norms (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Speech acts are therefore social acts, according to Mead’s definition.

Normative alignment is not simply performed, however, but must be negotiated, and this can involve conflictual struggles over power, status and responsibility (Dellwing 2015). Radical interactionism’s emphasis on domination rather than sociability as the principle motivation for social action (Athens 2013) leads us to consider moments of tension, dispute and the potential mis-alignment of competing interests. Rather than use stark, coercive force, actors may try more subtly to alter each other’s definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928), to “sway the construction of a social act in accordance with [their] preferences” (Athens 2013: 36).

For example, the (in-)directness of speech can be read as a marker of politeness. Searle (1975) argued that indirectness functions as a mitigating strategy, softening the offensive implications of an utterance. In English, requests are often made with indirectly worded prefaces, such as “Would you mind...?” or “I wondered if it might be possible...?”. Hearers read between the lines using the ‘et cetera clause’ (Garfinkel 1967) to intuitively grasp the illocutionary intent rather than the literal content, and may respond more positively than they would to a directly worded request. Goffman (1971) argued that such interchanges work strategically, by inducing the listener to perform face-saving work on the behalf of the speaker. We recognise the polite form of an utterance and respond to it at that level (“Of course, that’s fine!”) before we have time to consider its substantive content. This cleverly turns a potential ‘victim’ of rudeness into a dramaturgical team-mate, rendered complicit in their own subjugation (Scott 2015).
Direct utterances, often issued as imperative commands (“Shut the door!”), are rarely considered polite. Conventionally indirect speech is the opposite: passive grammatical constructions and wording that is not meant literally (“Would you be able to shut the door?”) are nevertheless easily recognisable by their culturally normative format, and thus regarded as polite. Non-conventionally indirect utterances, meanwhile, do not follow these rules, and may reveal the speaker’s private sentiments (“It’s very cold in here. I suppose that’s because people keep leaving the door open.”). Blum-Kulka (1987) argues that indirect speech, particularly when non-conventional in form, is costly for the hearer to interpret in terms of time and cognitive effort, and so may be considered impolite. She suggests that the key to politeness lies in finding a delicate balance between the interests of pragmatic clarity and non-coerciveness, which is most successfully achieved by conventional indirectness.

**Ritualised illusions**

Moving beyond the micro-level, the theories outlined above invite a meso-level analysis of what politeness does for the wider interaction order. As performative language, polite speech acts accomplish social functions on two levels. Not only do they deal with the immediate tasks of the situation (gaining permission, offering apologies, etc), but also, their conventionalised form demonstrates a broader commitment to the shared norms and values that they index (Meltzer and Musolf 2000; cf. Garfinkel 1967). Focused encounters (Goffman 1961), where actors come together to pursue a common purpose, require adherence to a tacitly understood set of rules, or ‘situational proprieties’ (ibid.).

Goffman (1967) emphasised the importance of such everyday, routinised practices of observance in upholding the interaction order. What he called *interaction rituals* are regular, stylised and conventional ways of relating in public, which symbolically affirm common values, thereby strengthening social solidarity. Interaction Ritual Theory suggests that, similar to religious worship, mundane everyday encounters can take a ritualised form that involves states of mutual awareness, shared attention and a celebratory surge of emotional energy (Collins 2005).
The ceremonial dimension of ritual exchanges reinforces interaction order (Strong 1979). Conversational etiquette involves ‘rules of (ir)relevance’ that in turn delineate “rules for the management of engrossment” (Goffman 1961:81): what can and cannot be talked about, how and with whom. There are ratified and non-ratified participants as well as bystanders, overhearers and eavesdroppers (Goffman 1976). ‘Natural’ talk is not completely free and spontaneous, as speakers must observe both the ‘system constraints’ of language and the ‘ritual constraints’ of normative regulation (Goffman 1976). Participants perform ‘ceremonial identities’, or prescribed, idealised roles within the situation, which reference institutional rules and convey a moral character (Strong, ibid.). For example, Goffman’s (1971) four-stage model of the apology (challenge, offering, acceptance and thanks) suggests mutual performances by two complementary roles, offender and claimant, who both display reverence for the rule that has been broken.

Politeness rituals can be read as gestures of deference and demeanour (Goffman 1967), conveying respect for status difference. These include hierarchical forms of address, such as the honorific pronoun Ni in Swedish (Ilie 2005), but also subtler indications of humility and modesty. Goffman (ibid.) defines deference as an expressed attitude of appreciation for another’s relative position to oneself, and demeanour as the symbolic, gestural actions used to communicate this. The latter is shown through rituals of avoidance (e.g. gaze avoidance) or presentation (e.g. salutations, apologies and compliments). Importantly, as these are interaction rituals, they are not performed by just one actor but rather managed between two or more, as a collaborative dance of shared dramaturgical labour. By definition, deference rituals involve transactional exchanges between super- and subordinate roles, indexing mutually acknowledged power relations. Thus Hallett (2007) argues that deference, paradoxically, permits the exercise of symbolic power: once acquired through the exhibition of appropriate demeanour, it can be used as cultural and symbolic capital to redefine actions or reframe situations. Deference and dominance, intriguingly, go hand in hand (Katovich 2013) in the accomplishment of consensus, as a broader social form (Simmel 1917). This illustrates Lukes’ (2005) third dimension of power, whereby controlling others’ interpretive meanings and definitions secures their willing compliance to be governed. Normative codes, such as politeness, may be perceived as benign, harmonious and mutually beneficial, despite concealing underlying conflicts of interest. Katovich
(2013) therefore suggests that radical interactionism can be extended to a perspective of radical dramaturgy, to analyse the social acts of ‘civil domination’ that are ritually enacted by cooperative team-mates.

As rule-following acts, these expressions serve symbolically as markers of civility, reassuring fellow actors that there will be business as usual. ‘Felicity’s condition’ (Goffman 1983b) is a tacit obligation upon actors to demonstrate social competence in interaction and behave predictably. Conventional behaviour, or ‘acting natural’, helps to maintain ‘normal appearances’ (Goffman 1969): not only to sustain a definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928) in the immediate context, but also to confirm one’s more general, enduring reliability as a dramaturgical team-mate. Such ‘enabling conventions’ index a background of shared understandings, which serve as a pragmatic resource for accomplishing intersubjective agreement (Schütz 1972). Symbolic Interactionists have observed the motivation actors share for upholding the semblance of interaction order, even (or especially) when it is actually precarious. Bracketing out their reflexive awareness of the messiness and complexity of negotiated order (Strauss 1978), and the propensity for disruption, they tacitly agree to ‘keep things clean’, maintaining the impression of smooth consensus, and avoid ‘causing a scene’ (Goffman 1959).

Politeness is one way of performatively enacting the official party line (Goffman, ibid.) and demonstrating one’s commitment to publicly defending it, despite any private misgivings (Scott 2015). It provides a veneer of gloss over the proceedings, reassuring everyone that they can expect civilised business as usual. Dramaturgically, this lends itself to cynical role performances (Goffman, ibid), whereby actors do not genuinely believe in the parts that they are playing. By tacit agreement, this deceptiveness is cooperatively practised but not publicly acknowledged; the phoniness of the show is deliberately and conspicuously disattended to, as the elephant in the room. In these scenarios, we find forms of interaction order such as polite fictions (Burns 1992), pretence awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1964) and presented realities (Scheff 1968), whereby actors recognise a discrepancy between their expressed definition of the situation and what everyone knows to really be the case. Relations of symbolic power and domination can thereby be concealed beneath a mask of polite, consensual order.
Collective facework rituals

Interaction order therefore has a public front, or ‘face’, just like social actors. Goffman (1955) defined face as the positive social value one claims for oneself, with implications for status, self-image and public esteem. Self-presentation helps with this, but its success depends on the audience’s reception: face is only “on loan from society” (1955:213) and can duly be withdrawn. Actors are concerned to be ‘in face’ (conforming to norms) and to ‘keep face’ throughout a scene, but worry about being ‘out of face’ (creating the wrong impression) or ‘losing face’ (through an embarrassing mistake). Fellow actors can ‘give’ or ‘save’ face by covering over the cracks of a flawed performance, and repairing the scene. Put together, these tactics of ‘facework’ describe “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he [sic] is doing consistent with face” (Goffman 1955: 228).

Facework is often deployed in the avoidance of embarrassment, which arises when actors fear they have communicated an impression of incompetence before an observing audience. Goffman (1956) describes the flustering of discomfort actors feel when they momentarily lose poise and cannot mobilise their dramaturgical resources. Gross and Stone (1964) agree that embarrassment occurs “whenever some central assumption in a transaction has been unexpectedly and unqualifiedly discredited” (1964: 2, emphasis in original). This often happens through the display of inappropriate identity: actors cannot meet their role requirements, and so the play grinds to an abrupt halt. Embarrassment is interactively created and managed, insofar as it emerges out of encounters and can be felt vicariously, collectively and contagiously, prompting teammates to lend tactful gestures of support. Their motives may not be entirely altruistic, however, because they also stand to gain from preventing other people’s embarrassing mistakes. Incompetent role performances undermine the definition of the situation that everyone has carefully constructed and is at pains to uphold. Thus, as well as compromising individual face, embarrassment threatens the collective face of interaction order.

Goffman (ibid.) makes two distinctions between different types of facework. Firstly, the avoidance process proactively prevents loss of face, while the corrective process
retroactively repairs the damage if it occurs. Polite avoidance techniques would include tact, discretion and disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes 1975), while polite corrective techniques would include apologies, excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968). Secondly, defensive facework is performed to keep or save one’s own face, while protective facework means saving someone else’s. Defensive politeness techniques would include apologies, modesty and indirectness, while protective politeness techniques would include carefully phrased requests, invitation declination, and benign fabrications or ‘white lies’ (Bok 1978).

To this latter distinction, I suggest a third type, collective facework (Rossing and Scott 2014), which is more relevant to meso-level interaction order. Whereas defensive and protective facework are performed by individuals to save another individual’s face, collective facework is performed by the members of a group to save their shared face, or common identity. For example, in a workplace-based aerobics class, participants were embarrassed by the role conflict of being high-achieving professional colleagues in a beginners’ low ability exercise group (Rossing and Scott 2014). They resolved this by denying the incongruous group identity and presenting themselves as mere ‘familiar strangers’: people whom we see regularly but do not interact with (Milgram 1977). Strategies of collective facework observed here included muteness and civil inattention (Goffman 1963): for example, members pretended not to see each other in the dance studio and changing rooms (Rossing and Scott 2014).

Facework is a central concept in a particularly influential (micro-level) sociolinguistic theory of politeness (Meier 1995). Brown and Levinson (1978) begin by distinguishing between two kinds of ‘face needs’ that actors have: positive (to have one’s line of self-presentation accepted) and negative (to be free to act without hindrance or intrusion). Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) compromise those needs, and are usually committed by a speaker (S) towards a hearer (H). Brown and Levinson then devise a typology of FTAs that relate to S’s or H’s positive or negative face needs. Threats to S’s positive face include confessing faults or accepting compliments (if these convey unwanted impressions of self); threats to S’s negative face include thanking or complimenting others (if resented as an obligation); threats to H’s positive face include complaints, insults and criticisms; and threats to H’s negative face - the most common - include orders, requests, apologies and compliments (which impose upon H, or oblige them to
respond with a conventional turn). The weight of an FTA depends on three factors: the social distance between H and S, the power relationship between them, and the ranking of the imposition, i.e. its level of seriousness.

Politeness strategies, then, are the actions taken to avert or manage potential FTAs. In Brown and Levinson’s theory, these are typically enacted by S with reference to H’s face needs, and so are also positive or negative, as well as direct or indirect. Positive politeness strategies are those that address H’s positive face needs, such as expressions of solidarity, informality, commiseration and sympathy. Negative politeness strategies address H’s negative face needs, and include restraint, modesty, quietness and reticence.

A final component of this theory is the manner in which polite speech acts are delivered. They can be ‘on record’ (direct and explicit, with clear illocutionary intent) or ‘off record’ (indirect and ambiguously phrased), as well as with or without ‘redress’ (action that mitigates the demands of an imperative). Brown and Levinson associated indirectness with politeness, particularly negative politeness, suggesting that the most polite form of expression would be ‘off-record with redress’. Alternatively, following Blum-Kulka’s (1987) model, the most polite form of expression could be ‘on-record with redress’, as this combines pragmatic clarity with tactful optionality, while minimising cognitive costs upon the hearer. Both theories would imply that bald imperatives without redressive action would be the most impolite or rude form of expression. But do these rules and principles still hold if we escalate to the meso-level of analysis?

**Cultural logics of politeness**

Language is reciprocally connected with national, cultural and ethnic identity (Oakes 2001; Joseph 2004). Social groups adopt distinct dialects and linguistic forms as a means of expressing common identity or imagined community (Anderson 1983), and the ‘binding tissue of words’ can create ‘ties of union’ (Malinowski 1923: 479). Cultural boundaries are symbolically marked by ethnolinguistic differences, and the micro-level rituals of everyday banal nationalism (Billig 1995) contribute to the meso-
level invention of tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). While discourses of nationalism are politically problematic, the idea of cultures sharing a modal personality (Du Bois 1944) or social character (Fromm 1942) has a long history in psychoanalytic social theory.

What terms like politeness and rudeness mean, and what they do for interaction order, therefore, are culturally and historically specific (Watts 2003). The ethogenic approach (Harré and Secord 1972) emphasises the cultural diversity of linguistic practices, while pointing to their regular, rule-governed form within each particular context (cf. Winch 1958). Brown and Fraser (1979) introduced the concept of speech communities: local groups or cultures who provide interpretive frameworks of rules, values and normative expectations. For example, we can compare cultural attitudes to positive self-disclosure (Holtgraves 2002). Whereas some African American speech communities admire this as an expression of emotional outspokenness (Labov 1972), some European-American cultures object to it as flouting norms of modesty, restraint and deference (Kochman 1981). Speech communities therefore have a collective face, which they co-operatively maintain.

Historians and anthropologists have argued there is an archetypically Swedish national character or cultural self-image (Phillips-Martinsson 1981; Daun 1996; Sundbärg 2013), which I suggest influences these collective interpretations and reflects meso-level values. In social surveys, Swedes describe themselves as rational, reliable, efficient, well-organised, punctual, correct, socially responsible and carefully polite (Phillips-Martinsson 1981). An influential text by Daun (1996) suggested that the ‘Swedish Mentality’, embedded in cultural consciousness, comprised values of equality, homogeneity, consensus-seeking, conflict avoidance, honesty, quietness, independence and conscientiousness.

Many of these ideals originate from the Swedish welfare state and Nordic model of social justice, which reconciles two oppositional ideologies: collectivist social democracy and individualistic free market capitalism (Robinowitz and Carr 2001; Larsson and Magdalenic 2015). Principles of equality, universal provision and protection of the vulnerable are achieved through high taxation and public service ownership, bolstered by social cohesion, homogeneity and civic participation in the political process (Daun 1996). Simultaneously, however, the Nordic model encourages
privacy, independence and self-sufficiency. Citizenship is based upon a direct relationship between the welfare state and the individual: trust in the state’s capability to provide (Edlund 2006) means not having to rely upon families or other people (Booth 2014).

Robinowitz and Carr (2001) explain that this model works as a paradoxical arrangement: being part of a stable collectivity and working co-operatively towards common social goals gives individuals the freedom to pursue their lives in private. Sundberg (2014) describes a similar notion of ‘atomistic unity’. In contrast to the American interpretation of liberty as the positive freedom to do, Swedes place greater value on the negative freedom to be – that is, to be left alone to do as one pleases (Booth 2014; cf. Berlin 1969). This reflects the idea of negative face needs. Self-sufficiency is shown by a preference to accomplish tasks by oneself, to be strong, capable and resilient (duktig), and not need to call upon others for help (Robinowitz and Carr 2001). These are not merely abstract cultural values, however: they are embedded in the interaction order, and expressed through patterns of ritualised collective facework.

**Methodology**

I now discuss the implications of these theories of politeness for the case of Sweden. By means of illustration, I draw upon empirical data from a small-scale, exploratory, qualitative study I conducted through semi-structured interviews with nine native Swedish people. These participants were recruited through a combination of volunteer and snowball sampling techniques. I first advertised the project to a cohort of Swedish students undertaking an English language course at a UK university, via an email circulated by their tutor. This recruited six people: five women and one man, aged between 20-30, who were white and middle class. I then augmented the sample through personal contacts and social networks; these further three participants were two women and one man, also white and middle class, and aged between 25-50. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect anonymity. This very small sample cannot, of course, be seen as representative of the Swedish population (although its demographic profile bears some similarities), but rather is intended as a source of exploratory ideas and a springboard for theorisation.
I interviewed the first six participants face-to-face, in a quiet, private study room in the university library. The interviews lasted between 30-60 minutes, and followed the format of ‘conversation to a purpose’ (Burgess 1984), being relatively informal but loosely organised by an interview schedule of seven broad, open-ended questions (Bryman 2012). These enquired about participants’ experiences of shyness, understandings of Jante Law, thoughts about Swedish national character, and cultural attitudes to politeness. I audio-recorded these interviews on a digital device and transcribed them myself. The second group of participants, who currently resided in Sweden, were given the choice between a live, synchronous online interview or an asynchronous email interview (Markham 1998), and all requested the latter (although I in fact interviewed one face-to-face, during a visit to Sweden). I sent them a shorter version of the interview schedule, including just four questions, and invited them to write as much as they wished under each before sending them back to me. I coded the textual data by hand and carried out a thematic analysis, informed by a Symbolic Interactionist perspective.

It is important to note the epistemological status of these data and their limitations. As I did not observe actual social encounters, nor analyse verbatim transcripts of conversation, I cannot make any substantial claims about what ‘really’ happens, empirically, during polite transactions. However, an interview-based study can cast illuminating insights into something different and equally interesting: how actors recall, interpretively understand and make sense of significantly meaningful occasions where they feel that politeness has occurred. Their accounts and explanations of these scenes, as well as more abstract reflections on their social functions, tell us something about how they perceive the self-society relationship: the lived experience of interaction order. As Mead (1929, 1932) argued, the symbolically reconstructed past is narrated from the standpoint of the present, as well as pragmatically oriented towards the future, in relation to the normative frameworks, shared values and going concerns (Hughes 1945) of a given cultural context. This dynamic model of subjectivity as process indicates both the reflexive temporality of selfhood and the precarious imagination of interaction order.

**Jante Law, modesty and humility**
A core aspect of Nordic culture is Jante Law (Jantelagen), an informally recognised code of conduct that discourages boasting, attention-seeking and self-aggrandisement, encouraging instead modesty, self-restraint and humble reserve. It is comparable to the Tall Poppy Syndrome of Australian folklore, which discourages people from standing out from the crowd, demanding recognition and claiming superiority. This exemplifies the notion of hidden shame as a mechanism of informal social control (Scheff 2014). Robinowitz and Carr (2001) suggest that Jante Law is a cultural millstone of Scandinavia: a tacitly known and unwittingly observed set of prescriptions and proscriptions for behaviour, and thus a mechanism of interaction order. As Mead (1922) argued, when a social act becomes institutionalised, through the shared maxims and normative codes of a community, members can more easily take the role of the other, predicting and co-ordinating their conduct through the ‘attitudinal assumption’. The idea of Jante comes from a novel by Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandmose (1933) about the eponymous fictional town, which issued commandments such as:

- You shall not presume that you are someone
- You shall not indulge in the conceit of imagining you are better than us
- You shall not presume that anyone cares about you
- You shall not presume that you can teach us anything

(Robinowitz and Carr 2001:81-2)

Jante Law was familiar to my participants, as a tacit cultural script into which they had been socialised:

- I think the biggest norm in Sweden is that you’re not supposed to brag about anything… you’re not supposed to be excited about your success… you’re not supposed to say anything good about yourself, and you’re supposed to be really modest about everything that you do. (Kerstin)

- You don’t see it. You never [explicitly] use it… It’s something that I kind of know about, but I don’t know where it comes from. (Åsa)

This moral code teaches two collectivist values: equality and humility. Firstly, everyone is of equal status: individuals should not seek the spotlight of personal success but rather work invisibly towards the common good. The term “En vanlig Svensson” is used
approvingly to describe an ‘ordinary’ person who is the same as everybody else (Daun 1996). In business and politics, Jante principles can be a disadvantage, as they discourage innovation, risk-taking and competitiveness, valuing instead cautious, consensus-based decision-making (Robinowitz and Carr 2001; Phillips-Martinsson 1981).

I guess it’s more of a solidarity, ‘everyone for everyone’, sort of thing. So when you do something really great, you’re out of that bubble. You’re saying ‘I’m better than the others’, and you’re not supposed to say that. So you’re just supposed to be one single, flat line of people.... you’re all supposed to be equal. (Kerstin)

Secondly, humility is cultivated. Boldness is akin to boastfulness and duly frowned upon, as it implies vanity, pride, conceit and arrogance, together with an embarrassing lack of self-awareness. Taylor (1985) draws an important distinction between the moral connotations of pride as an objective versus subjective quality: we accept being ‘proud of’ something that one has earned (especially cherished possessions or accomplishments), while deploring being ‘proud’ in oneself, as a character trait. Taylor explains that the latter involves a social comparison between self and others, with a superior view of oneself. Conversely, humility can be admired as a virtue insofar as it involves social comparison downwards: regarding oneself as inferior (or at best equal) to others:

We’re horrible at taking compliments. Like receiving them. We’re just, ‘Oh no, no’. And I don’t think that’s politeness; I think it’s – we don’t really believe that we are deserving of it. (Sonja)

If I get any compliments, or anything, I mostly feel embarrassed… I’m happy as well, but it’s mostly in private, because how are you supposed to handle it, if someone tells you something nice? (Åsa)

This even extends to self-deprecating attitudes to the cultural identity itself:
It might be a little bit of a Swedish thing to be underestimating national culture... you’re self-critical, and it’s good to be un-Swedish... To be humble about your Swedishness is very Swedish! (Åsa)

However, there is a complication. Honesty and directness are also valued, insofar as they facilitate consensual decision-making, but boldly asserting one’s opinions would breach Jante Law. Resolving this conundrum requires careful interactional management. Becker (2000) suggests that similar social processes are symbolically represented by the etiquette of jazz improvisation, which he describes as ‘aggressively egalitarian’. Band members follow tacitly agreed rules of listening to all suggestions and deferring to the developing collective direction of the music, while ruthlessly discarding ideas that do not work for everyone.

Thus, Swedish culture, as a speech community, exhibits a tension between two sets of meso-level collective values. Jante Law concerns an array of negative collective face needs: inconspicuousness, modesty, humility, privacy, avoiding confrontation and not ‘causing a scene’ (Goffman 1971). However, these conflict with the positive collective face needs of honesty, directness, consensus and transparency. This makes it difficult to employ the usual techniques of negative politeness, such as indirectness and tact, as well as protective facework, which only saves an individual’s face. Instead, I suggest that collective facework rituals serve to address both sets of face needs for the whole speech community, thereby resolving the tension of values and contributing to the interaction order. I will now show how this process plays out in two forms of conversational politeness.

Collective facework to address negative collective face needs: silence, shyness and reserve

The Swedish principle of lagom teaches moderation, in everything from material possessions to social behaviour. In conversation, one ought to speak just enough to take a fair share of responsibility (Scott 2007), but not excessively or unnecessarily. Silence is valued, while talk-for-its-own-sake is frowned upon as a threat to negative collective face needs:
People say, ‘Oh, he talks a lot’, or ‘She talks a lot’. I guess people don’t think that you’re supposed to do that... you don’t want to seem too social or too ‘out there’, because it’s not a part of what’s supposed to be Swedish. (Kerstin)

When encountering new people, actors exercise dramaturgical circumspection (Goffman 1959) through a cautiously reserved approach. Blanket friendliness is avoided as a negative face threat, because it risks turning unfocused encounters into focused ones (Goffman 1961) that would demand more interactional labour:

> I am initially rather wary of other people. I prefer to keep my distance until I know what they're like. I guess it's basically a question of trust. (Frederik)

Nevertheless, the conscious enactment of this performance implies a brutal honesty: the frank recognition of negative face needs, paradoxically, indexes the speech community’s positive face needs. Using the language of shrewd investment and financial risk-taking, two participants described a process of rational discernment in strategic interaction (Goffman 1969):

> I choose my friends carefully, and I’m not going to spend time with someone who’s just wasting my time, or doesn’t bring me anything... I don’t think it’s worth my energy. (Josefin)

> I’m usually not sociable if I feel there is no future in the relationship. Because I want something that can last, to find something worthwhile. (Sonja)

Thus, while Swedish people might be stereotypically perceived as cold, aloof or misanthropic (Booth 2014), these are not pervasive character traits, but rather a performative strategy, enacted electively in some situations. The mask can be dropped when backstage with those who have been screened for dramaturgical loyalty (Goffman 1959):

> [Swedes] might have this kind of barrier, to strangers or to people they don’t really know. They have to really get to know the person a little bit better, or have some more details about the person before they open up themselves. [But]
when they do, they can actually be really nice and warm people, in the opposite way. (Tove)

Such behaviour could be read as shyness, which Daun (1996) identifies as the dominant national characteristic. Swedes are “rather shy, reserved, withdrawn, stiff, and in many cases not very interested in approaching someone they do not know” (1996:31). This resonates with Jante Law: there is a fear of expressing oneself and demanding attention (Holm 1978), especially when this involves confrontation, challenge or disagreement. Such moves risk ‘causing a scene’ by disrupting the harmonious consensus:

I don’t want to say something if I don’t know it is absolutely correct. (Eva)

I don’t want to make a fool of myself… we’d rather just be silent, than say something that might be embarrassing. (Tove)

This cultural normalisation means that shyness in Sweden is not considered socially deviant, but on the contrary, positively valued (Elfstadius and Pressner 1984, Daun 1996). Akin to Taylor’s (1985) reading of humility, shyness affirms Jante values and serves the negative face needs of the speech community. As well as defending individual faces, it protects the collective face of interaction order. Daun suggests that, “Swedes ascribe to the shy person admirable characteristics – reflectiveness, modesty, or unpretentiousness (which is highly valued), willingness to listen to others.” (1996: 34- 39).

Moreover, if conversational reticence is strategically performed to cultivate social approval, perhaps it is not shyness after all. Quietness can be an expression of introversion - a contented preference to be alone – rather than of shyness, an anguished ambivalence about social visibility and feeling of relative incompetence (Scott 2007). My participants explained that they did not want to speak more than necessary, to waste people’s time with obsequious chatter, but that when they did have something to say, they would say it frankly and with confidence. Here we see how Swedish values of honesty and directness clash with the conventions of politeness, lending support to Blum-Kulka’s (1987) argument that utterances made baldly ‘on record, without redress’ are the most impolite. Far from being shy, Swedes can be (mis-)perceived as
rude (Scott 2007), because of their bluntness and disinclination to sugar-coat interlocutionary speech acts with verbal niceties:

*We speak more straight to the point. If you don’t have anything to say, you don’t say it. But when you say it, it’s going to be, ‘Boom! Here it is.’ ... Blunt, I think that’s probably the word.* (Josefin)

By the same logic, lying is frowned upon because it is pragmatically inefficient: it wastes time and energy in deciphering subtextual meanings, placing unnecessary cognitive demands upon the audience (cf. Blum-Kulka 1987). Loquacious insincerity is similarly regarded as impolite because it intrudes upon the collective ‘freedom to be’ left alone. This is reflected in Swedes’ impatient dislike for small talk (*kallprat* – cold talk) about distracting trivia, and an instrumental orientation to talk-in-interaction:

*We don’t really get that small talk. Why would you make small talk with someone you don’t really know, when you’re never going to meet them again?*  
*If someone asks me, ‘How’re you doing?’, I’ll be, ‘Why did you ask that?’ I’ll be a bit suspicious.* (Bertil)

An example of this concerns the supportive interchange ritual (Goffman 1971) of greetings and ‘grooming talk’. Goffman suggests these rituals are performed for their symbolic function rather than their literal content: they indicate actors’ mutual positive regard and commitment to continuing the relationship (Scott 2015). Conventional responses are elicited: when asked “How are you?”, we automatically reply “Fine, thank you”, regardless of how we actually feel (Goffman 1976; Scott 2015). However, in the Swedish context, this ritual is hindered by the values of honesty and verbal parsimony. Except in the most fleeting of encounters, it is acceptable to speak openly and express one’s true feelings. In a scenario reminiscent of Garfinkel’s (1967) breaching experiments, one participant described how a Swedish cultural script prescribed giving literal responses to grooming talk:

*If someone asks, ‘How are you doing?’, many people in Sweden would answer with, ‘Oh, not so well.’ ‘I have so much work to do and I’m so stressed.’ ... The most common answer is, of course, ‘Good, how are you?’; but it’s not something you’d react upon, if somebody answered honestly.* (Kerstin)
Collective facework to address positive collective face needs: interruption, apology and repair

Meanwhile, the principles of equality, solidarity, consensus and fairness reflect positive collective face needs. These are addressed by collective facework rituals to sanction verbal domination. Conversation analysts have pointed to the sequences of turns that structure everyday talk (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), and the importance of giving expected, conventional and normatively preferred responses (Schegloff 2007). Tacit rules govern the negotiation of appropriate response forms and timings (Goffman 1976) and speaker changeovers (Sacks 1992). Ritual constraints occur in adjacency pairings (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), such as question-answer; request-permission granting; greeting-return greeting; and apology-acceptance, which carry an obligation to give the conventional second part response. In polite dialogue, a common pairing is remedy-relief (Goffman 1976), whereby speakers preface an FTA (e.g. a request) with passive and indirect wording, disclaimers or redress options (Brown and Levinson 1978) that soften its intrusiveness, and hearers respond with reassurance that no offence has been taken.

Pedersen (2010) explores the implications of tacksamhetsskuld, a debt of gratitude, for the polite rituals of thanking. Swedish people thank each other (“Tack”) frequently and reciprocally, in extended turn-taking sequences. Conversational indebtedness feels uncomfortable, spreads contagiously, and is interactivelly avoided. By sparing the blushes of all parties, mutual thanking is a collective facework ritual, which symbolically affirms the positive face needs of respect, equality and consensus. Related conversational habits include the frequent offering of ‘keep going signals’ (Goffman 1976) such as “jaha” (yes, indeed) and “just det” (right, I see) to show comprehension and acceptance (Allwood 1981), and exclamatory punctuations like “Precis!” (precisely) to give reassurance of agreement (Scott 2015).

Occasionally, however, these norms are broken. Austin (1962) pointed to the failed speech acts, or ‘infelicities’ that cause unintended offence, such as misunderstandings, frame breaks, and mistimed attempts to take the floor (Goffman 1983b). Verbal domination breaches Jante Law by suggesting individual arrogance and pride,
unbalancing the conversational equilibrium. Voluble talk is similarly frowned upon because it demands more than one’s fair share of attention:

*You don’t want to be too loud. You don’t want to be too much. Because [if] someone claims themselves to be bigger, then you take up other people’s space.* (Linda)

*There is actually a hostile feeling towards people who try to dominate too much. Maybe that is a bit Jante.* (Bertil)

Interruption is therefore fastidiously avoided, through ritualised displays of deference and mutual respect. Interlocutors try to share the floor and speak for equal durations of time, reflecting the principle of *lagom* (moderation):

*One person talks at a time, and the others around are just listening to that person... I want to wait until the person has finished what they want to say, and then I can come with my opinion.* (Tove)

Goffman (1976) likens interruption to an invasion of verbal territory, a negative FTA in Brown and Levinson’s (1978) model. However, it is also a positive FTA, by denying fellow actors the chance to present individual or team performance lines. In both respects, interruption prevents the ritualised display of mutual consideration. “*To interrupt someone is much like tripping over him [sic]; both acts can be perceived as instances of insufficient concern for the other*” (Goffman 1976: 281):

*I’d never, like – do you know the saying ‘Prata i mun på varann’? Like when you speak in someone’s mouth? I wouldn’t do that, you know; I would wait my turn.* (Josefin)

Moral indignation and annoyance are felt towards those who offend these principles:

*I take issue with people who want to dominate a social situation. If I’m at the pub and someone’s being really loud, and they’re all making a big scene of themselves, I’d probably get a bit cold and hostile... On the bus, if they start talking on the phone, I get a bit irritated as well. I think it’s a bit rude that they’re dominating this quiet social space.* (Bertil)
Such breaches are repaired by rituals of collective facework. Remedial interchanges (Goffman 1971) acknowledge that a rule has been broken, perform some corrective action and underline participants’ shared allegiance to the values at stake. The enactment of this is itself a ceremonial ritual, symbolically displaying the actors’ mutually felt detachment from both the virtual offence and the moral character it implies. Goffman (1976) discusses pre-emptive apologies given before an interruption, which involve, “a promise of how little long the talk will be, the assumption being that the recipient has the right to limit how long he [sic] is to be active in this capacity.” (Goffman 1976: 267). More commonly, apologies are offered retrospectively, in recognition of a committed FTA:

*I usually stop myself. I realise that I have interrupted someone, and I’m like, “Oh, sorry, sorry! Continue.”* (Kerstin)

Remedial interchanges are initiated by a ‘virtual claimant’, whose face has been threatened, and directed towards a ‘virtual offender’, who stands accused (Goffman 1971). One participant explained how he had adopted the former role when he felt himself the victim of interruption. His direct confrontation of the offender surprised even himself, for it breached the negative face need of conflict avoidance and ‘not causing a scene’. But he perhaps reacted unusually because the situation breached his speech community’s positive face needs. The honesty and bluntness of his reaction is interesting, as is the offender’s humbly submissive response, in demonstrating their mutual regard for these values of equality and fairness:

*(My ex-flatmate) has this habit of interrupting people, and I remember her cutting me off, every single time. I remember throwing my hand on the table and saying (angry tone) ‘Can you please stop talking over me!’ . And she was like, (hushed tone) ‘Oh, ok, sorry.’ I don’t think I’ve ever done that before. That was kind of strange, actually. I got extremely irritated and annoyed.* (Bertil)

**Conclusion**
Politeness, as a cluster of ritualised, performative speech acts, helps social actors to ‘do things’ in interaction, with both illocutionary intentions and perlocutionary effects. As well as serving individual face needs, this process operates at the meso-level realm of interaction order, by translating macro cultural scripts into micro-social action to address collective face needs. Radical dramaturgy encourages us to recognise the power relations at play in social encounters, and their subtle negotiation through interaction rituals. If consensus is a Simmelian social form, emerging through a dynamic dialectic of deference and domination, then politeness rituals are one mechanism through which this is accomplished.

This article has explored the implications of this through the example of Swedish society as a distinct speech community. Cultural scripts reveal a tension between two sets of conflicting values that reflect negative collective face needs (modesty, reserve, tact and self-sufficiency) and positive collective face needs (honesty, directness, consensus and equality). Through the paradox of atomistic unity, Swedes invest in cohesive and collective social action in order to defend their individual ‘freedom to be’. At the heart of this contradiction lies the Nordic code of Jante Law, which discourages boasting and encourages modest humility. This would normally invite conventional indirectness as the preferred mode of politeness, but such forms of talk would be infelicitous toward the second set of values.

This tension is resolved through interaction rituals of collective facework, which address both negative and positive collective face needs. Firstly, the principle of *lagom* (moderation) prescribes verbal reticence and dramaturgical circumspection. Rather than shyness, this is strategic quietness, designed to protect negative collective face needs by avoiding the obligations of focused encounters. It is counter-balanced by a preparedness to speak frankly and directly ‘on record’ when the situation demands, eschewing loquacious niceties. Secondly, ritual constraints govern the distribution of floor-taking and sanction verbal domination. This indexes the positive collective face needs of equality, fairness and harmonious consensus. Interruption is an infelicitous speech act that breaches Jante Law by signalling immodesty and pride. It is duly sanctioned by avoidant and corrective processes of collective facework. Avoidant rituals include turn-taking sequences that perform solidarity and reciprocity (such as mutual thanking and keep-going signals), preventing conversational indebtedness.
Corrective rituals include the remedial interchanges of interactional repair work, such as apology-acceptance pairings.

The humble modesty expressed in these forms of talk involves collaborative, tacitly negotiated role performances. The ceremonial enactment of interaction rituals symbolises actors’ shared commitment to the norms, rules and values that are at stake, beyond their individual motives of self-presentation. As dramaturgical team-mates, they co-operate to protect the interaction order, by sustaining or restoring normal appearances and avoiding disruptive scenes. Such ritualised consideration for collective face needs makes conversational politeness significant at the meso-level, within and beyond the Swedish context.

References


