

This is a reviewed article

'Typically Norwegian to be impolite.' Impoliteness according to whom?

Kristin Rygg
NHH (Norwegian School of Economics)
Kristin.Rygg@nhh.no

Keywords:

Norwegian
politeness
impoliteness
expectations
evaluations
distance rule of politeness

Abstract

This article discusses claims by immigrants in Norway that Norwegians are impolite from the book entitled, Typically Norwegian to Be Impolite? (Aambø, 2005). These claims are compared with other sources and discussed using theories primarily from linguistic politeness research. The overall aim of the article is to add to the limited research on (im)politeness in Norway and to increase awareness of Norwegian behavioural and communicative norms about (im)politeness.

The study finds that some of the behaviour that foreigners deem impolite is considered impolite by many Norwegians too. Other behaviour, it is suggested, is not generated by indifference to politeness or an intent to be impolite, but rather, the opposite: to show consideration through a 'distance rule of politeness' that respects others' autonomy and personal space. Concrete manifestations are not disturbing people with excessive talk, especially those one does not know well; not disturbing people with things one can manage on one's own; not disturbing people by taking up their time; and, for shop assistants, not disturbing customers who have not asked for help. Verbal forms of politeness become less important when it is considered more polite not to talk at all unless one has something 'proper' (i.e. truthful, informational) to say.

Introduction

To the best of my knowledge, little research has been conducted on Norwegian politeness or impoliteness, yet there has been extensive debate on this topic in public media and on social media. The following are two examples from Norwegian newspapers.

Vietnamese born anthropologist Anh Nga Longva at the University of Bergen writes this in *Aftenposten*, a Norwegian newspaper, on 17 November 2004¹:

Among foreigners in Norway, Norwegians' 'lack of politeness' is a favourite topic. Some are deeply shocked and feel offended; most people are just surprised that this overall friendly people, with a high level of education, who live in prosperity and peace, seem so indifferent to normal politeness.

Ten years later, this impression remains the same. The most recent debate on Norwegian impoliteness started in 2013 with a reader's letter² to *Bergens Tidende*, another Norwegian newspaper. With the heading 'Arrogant Norwegians' a Norwegian-American girl named Emily writes:

I consider myself a fairly ordinary person. I say hi to everyone I meet – the one sitting next to me on the bus, my friends' friends, teachers, shop assistants – anyone. I do it simply because it's a habit; it is to be friendly. I also appreciate it when a stranger greets me with a hi, or just gives me a smile. This is common in the States, at least. If there is something I have noticed in Norway, it is the fact that Norwegians are not friendly. They normally just care about themselves and their own. Of course, this doesn't apply to everybody, but to many.

'What happened to normal politeness?', she wonders. Those who supported Emily at the time her letter was published online were of the opinion that Norwegians could, if they tried, pull themselves together and show better manners (Rygg, 2016).

This article bases its discussion on one specific source belonging to the same non-academic genre, a book entitled *Typically Norwegian to Be Impolite?* (Aambø, 2005), which includes chapters by fifteen immigrants. Immigrants are not a heterogenic group where politeness norms are concerned. Even so, the contributors to the book, who spent their childhoods in different countries and identify themselves as immigrants in Norway, have some common experiences of impolite behaviour in their new country. Thus, the first research question, limited to data in Aambø (2005), is as follows:

RQ1: When do immigrants find Norwegians impolite?

By limiting the scope of discussion to this particular book, I do not make claims about other immigrants who might or might not problematize Norwegian behaviour in a similar manner. Further, in Aambø (2005) the term 'Norwegian' seems to correspond to ethnic Norwegians, defined not only by their nationality but also by a uniform culture. Modern linguistic politeness research, which is the field this article positions itself in, has by and large moved away from grand assumptions of the (im)politeness of cultures defined as nations. Thus, it is problematic to talk about 'Norwegians' without also emphasising that it is unlikely that all Norwegian nationals identify with the values and norms that are ascribed to them.

In the two introductory quotes above, Norwegians are evaluated on the basis of so-called normal politeness. Within linguistic politeness research, the question of what is 'normal', that

¹ Longva, A. N. (2004, November 17) Nordmenn, høflighet og kunsten å omgås fremmede [Norwegians, politeness and the art of socialising with strangers]. *Aftenposten*. Retrieved from http://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikker/Nordmenn_hoflighet-og-kunsten-a-omgas-fremmede-6325627.html. Quote translated from Norwegian.

² Mason, E. (2013, March 14) Overlegne nordmenn [Arrogant Norwegians], *Bergens Tidende*. Retrieved from <http://blogg.bt.no/btbatt/2013/03/14/overlegne-nordmenn/>.

is, universal politeness, has been extensively and critically debated over the years. In the following section, I discuss key issues and controversies in order to gain the conceptual tools needed to answer the second research question:

RQ2: Is the behaviour found in RQ1 a sign of Norwegian indifference towards normal politeness?

As mentioned above, Norwegian behaviour is criticised for being impolite, and Norwegians, who are thus criticised en masse, cannot defend themselves because so little knowledge exists about Norwegian behavioural or communicative norms. With the aim of providing Norwegians with the tools to defend themselves from this critique, this article too makes assumptions about 'Norwegian attitudes and norms' that might be an eye-opener to some, and with which I do not believe all Norwegians identify. A small scale, qualitative and somewhat indicative study such as this one can nevertheless act as an important first step to inspire follow-up investigations and encourage discussions on Norwegian behavioural and communicative norms on (im)politeness.

Below, the notion of universal politeness from a linguistic perspective is discussed before approaching the analytical procedures and the results of the analysis in this particular study.

Politeness theories and the question of universal politeness

Watts (2003) defines polite behaviour as 'mutually shared forms of consideration for others' (p. 28). Thus, to a certain degree, members of a society have a shared understanding of what politeness embodies. The question is whether a universally shared understanding of politeness exists and whether it has a similar linguistic manifestation in different languages. I start with the latter.

Before the 1970s, linguistic politeness was especially occupied with conventional lexical forms of politeness (Watts, 2003, p. 10). Polite address forms, such as '*vous*' (French) or '*sie*' (German), which are often referenced to exemplify formal politeness in European languages (Kádár & Haugh, 2013, p. 26), were never part of Norwegian folk culture (Haugen, 1978). Further, as a result of young people rejecting elite culture in the 1970s (Haugen, 1978), the V-form '*De*' has largely disappeared (Fretheim 2005). However, when Norwegians born before 1960 were asked whether they missed the formal address form '*De*', none did (Rygg, 2017). A man from Western Norway and born in 1920, explains why³: 'We easily end up being embarrassed or embarrassing others if we have to sort people into *De*'s and *du*'s (T-form)'.

The man's point is that a wrong address form may create an awkward situation. To embarrass others is not polite, even if *De* is a so-called polite word. Thus, as argued by many linguists (e.g. Watts, 2003; Culpeper, 2011), no linguistic expressions are inherently polite. However, when the use of expressions closely associated with politeness diminishes, they can be missed. In Norwegian, formal greetings such as '*god dag*'/ 'good day' are disappearing without any equally formal replacements. Thus, many Norwegians have no choice other than to use the informal '*hei*'/ 'hi' with elders, and some find it difficult (Rygg, 2017). According to Fretheim (2005), there are few linguistic manifestations of formal politeness in modern Norwegian.

Starting in the 1970s, politeness research broadened to include socio-pragmatic concerns (Lakoff, 1973; Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987; Leech, 1983) regarding people's strategic attempts to be polite through various means. However, instead of finding universal strategies, the theories have been used instead to dissect why people who aim to be polite still end up misunderstanding each other. For instance, Bailey (2000) found that the reason why African-American customers in the United States deemed Korean-American retail store owners impolite (evidence that there can be different politeness norms within one country) was

³ Survey data from NEG - *Norsk etnologisk gransking* on greetings and address forms, translated from Norwegian.

because the Korean shop owners did not engage in friendly small talk about the weather or joke about current events ('positive politeness strategies', in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terminology) and instead were impersonal and formal and avoided eye-contact ('negative politeness strategies'; Brown & Levinson, 1987). When it comes to Norwegian communication, Fretheim (2005) maintains that linguistic manifestations of both positive and negative politeness strategies in Norway 'are not of the conspicuous sort' (p. 145), meaning that there is little of both. Whereas negative politeness aims to minimise the likelihood of being an imposition, Lakoff (1973) argues that there is another way to respect others' privacy, and that is not to impose at all ('a distance rule of politeness', in her term). She describes the rule as one in which the strategic aim is 'to avoid imposition on the addressee by wasting his time with meandering or trivia' (p. 303). An example might be when Pavlidou (2008), who investigates German and Greek telephone openings, finds that the German way of showing politeness is to 'refrain from keeping the partner on the phone for too long and letting them know pretty soon the reason for calling' (p. 133).

In sum, from a linguistic, theoretical point of view, there are many understandings of the forms and functions of politeness, thus, the notion of any 'normal', that is, a universal politeness, is difficult to defend.

Nowadays, politeness research encompasses 'all types of interpersonal behaviour through which we take into account the feelings of others as to how we think they should be treated' (Kádár, 2013, p. 24). Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2016) point out an important shift within linguistic politeness research:

It is now widely accepted that (im)politeness entails an evaluative judgement: We assess people to be polite or impolite, based on our interpretations of their behaviour/language. (p. 74)

This shift from a focus on the speaker's strategic intent to be polite to an emphasis on the hearer's interpretation of his or her behaviour was suggested earlier by Sperber and Wilson (1986), but it was not discussed specifically in relation to politeness until around the turn of the millennium (Escandell-Vidal, 1996; Eelen, 2001). Sperber and Wilson (2006, p. 188) maintain that communication is only successful when the hearer interprets an utterance in accordance with the speaker's intent. This is an especially interesting point in intercultural communication because interpretation is done based not only on the immediate surrounding context but, perhaps more importantly, also on expectations guided by the hearer's pre-knowledge and beliefs associated with a type of event and referred to as a 'script' (Žegarac, 2008, p. 61). Misunderstandings occur when people are trying to act out the same 'scene' (i.e. event) with different internalised scripts (Escandell-Vidal, 1996, p. 643).

A collection of scripts constitute what is popularly called a person's culture. From the anthropological tradition, Hall (1959)⁴ argues that much of our culture consists of rules of polite behaviour that children learn verbally from their parents or from being scolded after trespassing them ('formal culture' in Hall's terminology). Because they are norms that have been verbalized, they are conscious or 'in-awareness' to us. An example from shared, formal Norwegian culture is taking off one's shoes when entering someone's home. Violations might be met with a frown, but one is conscious of the source of anger. However, other parts of a person's culture are 'hidden' or 'out-of-awareness' ('informal culture', in Hall's terminology). These are the things that have not been acquired by being spoken of directly, but by mimicking others. An example of such an unwritten rule is the space kept between oneself and an interlocutor during a conversation. Informal culture might pose the largest threat to intercultural communication since it is out-of-awareness, and therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint why one evaluates others' behaviour the way one does. Hall treats culture in its

⁴ Hall (1959) has been criticised for limiting the notion of culture to national culture (Cardon, 2008). The way I understand formal and informal culture above, however, has more to do with how individuals acquire values and norms, regardless of whether or not they turn out to be similar to those of fellow nationals.

entirety as a form of communication. Thus, one might intend to be polite, but one can never be fully aware of what one's behaviour communicates to others.

Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2016) refer to Cialdini (2012) when they make the distinction between 'descriptive norms', or expectations about how people normally behave and 'injunctive norms', or moral judgements about how people should normally behave. Hence, recipients not only interpret others' behaviour based on their own expectations, but they also evaluate it in terms of good/bad, normal/strange and polite/impolite. If politeness were universal, then evaluations would be universal too, but it is easy to find proof of the opposite. For instance, Scollon and Scollon (2012) remark that Americans' intent to show friendliness and politeness by chatting to strangers about personal topics (a positive politeness strategy) often causes them to be evaluated by non-Americans as 'overly friendly', 'pushy' or 'loud' (p. 54).

There is a growing body of linguistic literature on the topic of impoliteness, but it is mainly on how people intend to be inconsiderate, rude, aggressive, hurtful, and so on. (Culpeper, 2011). This is not the focus of this article. Here, the focus is rather on unintentional impoliteness. In this, I follow Mills (2009), who holds that 'there is nothing intrinsically impolite about any utterance. Often what is at issue is a negative judgement about the person accused of impoliteness' (p. 1049). Thus, when Fretheim (2005) indicates that there are few conventional lexical forms of politeness or linguistic manifestations of positive/negative politeness strategies in Norwegians' daily use, Witoszek (2001)⁵ evaluates this as 'communicative stinginess', as if Norwegians consciously and spitefully choose not to use words. The validity of this claim is addressed in the final section of this article.

⁵ Referred to in Aambø (2005: 81). Originally published in *Aftenposten* (2001, March 11) but no longer attainable on the internet.

Data and methodology

Above I discussed how some of Norwegian culture is 'hidden' in the sense that there is little conscious (verbalised or written) information about it. A way to detect this hidden culture is to look at how people themselves interpret and evaluate their intercultural experiences, especially those things that surprise or annoy them (see, e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2011, on the importance of studying emotion comments in pragmatic research). By nature, *metadiscursive comments*⁶ are not objective, but rather highly subjective assessments of one's own or other's behaviour (Kádár and Haugh, 2013, p. 207). In the present article, such metadiscursive data are extracted from four sources.

The first source is the book called *Typisk norsk å være uhøflig? [Typically Norwegian to Be Impolite?]*, edited by Aambø (2005). It was written with the aim of raising Norwegians' awareness of how their norms affect newcomers to the country, which has gone from having a more or less homogenous culture as of the 1960s to one that is now more multicultural (p. 16). Although many of the 15 immigrant authors who write chapters for the book are versed in academic writing, this book is defined as 'non-academic' (p. 180) and is instead based on personal experiences. Mills (2009) rightfully stresses that discussions on the politeness of other cultures are often ideological and stereotypical judgements of their appropriateness relative to one's own culture. Indeed, I find that the authors often (but not always) explicitly contrast impolite Norwegian behaviour with their more polite home countries' behaviour. This article's analysis was done by marking all comments about impolite Norwegian behaviour and categorising them, as explained in the introduction to the following section, below.

The remaining three sources of information contain material that is written or spoken by Norwegian nationals: a) newspaper articles, b) blogs written by Norwegian exchange students abroad and c) my personal communications with students and colleagues. The blogs were retrieved by searching the Internet for 'utveksling'/'student exchange' and 'blogg'/'blog' and looking for metadiscursive comments about issues described as surprising or annoying, with the expectation that those would be about what was different from home (see below for a thorough explanation). The choice of extracts in this article is not random and could be criticised for ignoring conflicting evidence. That is, a content analysis of a larger corpus would undoubtedly have revealed Norwegians whose views on politeness coincide with the immigrants in Aambø (2005) or who simply do not problematize different politeness norms. However, my aim was to discuss the claims of Norwegian impoliteness made in Aambø (2005) by introducing alternative views. Nevertheless, there is a danger of creating new stereotypes of Norwegians. I try to decrease this risk by showing contrasting views in the following section and by opening up the discussion in the final section. However, as mentioned in the introduction (see also Mills, 2009), it is difficult to avoid some degree of stereotyping when talking about communicative norms beyond the individual or immediate contextual level.

⁶I use this term from Kádár and Haugh, 2013, p. 194, because the data contain not only reflexive comments about communication but also conduct and norms.

Examples of Norwegian impoliteness

With reference to Hall's classification, I divide the following examples of impoliteness from Aambø (2005) into culture that is formal (behaviour that I claim is in-awareness to many Norwegians, too), informal (communicative norms that I suggest are out-of-awareness to many Norwegians) and professional (politeness related to a professional context, in this case, the service industry, which can be both in- and out-of-awareness to Norwegians). Claims from the book are discussed by relating them to a) the Norwegian sources mentioned in the previous section, and b) previous research. All quotes have been translated from Norwegian by the author.

Formal impoliteness

The first matter to discuss from Aambø (2005) is something that can be placed under the collective term 'formal culture' because it contains issues that Norwegian public transportation companies also explicitly address in continuous campaigns aimed at their passengers. The campaigns are targeted at people who enter a bus or train before other passengers have gotten off; those who do not move into the wagon to let more people on; and those who do not give up their seat to elderly, pregnant or disabled passengers. According to the Oslo transportation company,⁷ its campaigns are driven not only by the practicalities of trying to keep a tight time schedule but also by numerous complaints they receive from the public, most of them Norwegian passengers. Thus, there must be many Norwegians who also look at these as violations of their own politeness norms. Other similar complaints are about people who do not stand on the right-hand side of the escalator so that other people may pass on the left, do not let people out of the elevator before entering, do not hold the door for others coming behind and do not apologise when bumping into someone else. For the latter, Longva (Aambø, 2005, p. 73) describes such people in the following way: '[M]en, women and youth who bump into you with their rucksacks or tread on your toes just to head on, seemingly unaware of what they have done.'

It is possible that these people were intentionally impolite and fellow Norwegians would be equally unforgiving (even though many Norwegians, who have carried a rucksack daily since their first day at school, know that a rucksack is not as easy to manoeuvre as a handbag or a shoulder bag in cramped spaces). However, as mentioned by Longva, the possibility also exists that the violators are unaware of the offence they have caused. Their idea of space (cf. Hall, 1959) is different from that of the person being violated, and they have not been brought up to apologise in such situations (see e.g. Tanaka et al., 2008, p. 73ff. for different uses of verbal apologies in different languages), or they are being absentminded or shy. These alternative interpretations are further discussed with regards to Norwegian values and communicative norms in the final section of this article. No matter the cause, people with other expectations evaluate such behaviour as inconsiderate and rude.

⁷ Kan du normal folkeskikk? Dette irriterer oss [Do you know what normal politeness is? This annoys us] (2014, May 14). Klikk.no. Retrieved from: <http://www.side2.no/aktuelt/kan-du-normal-folkeskikk/777578.html>

Informal impoliteness

There is something that bothers the fifteen immigrant authors more than 'formal impoliteness' and that is the difficulties they have getting into contact with Norwegians. 'Norwegian *forsiktighet* (shyness, discretion) borders on unfriendliness' says one author (Aambø, 2005, p. 198). Others make similar comments:

It seems that the ability to be friendly and behave politely towards strangers is not among the social abilities that Norwegians value the most. (p. 75)

It is not easy to come in contact with Norwegians [...] there are few who have shown me the extra friendly gesture of getting the conversation going, something that I thought was normal politeness. (p. 186)

In the elevator, Norwegians often stare silently at their shoes. They practise the art of chatting about this and that to strangers less. (p. 203)

In the introduction, Emily saw this as evidence that Norwegians do not care about strangers. There might be other explanations. However, I believe this is informal (out-of-awareness) culture to many Norwegians, and therefore, besides it being discussed by a few Norwegian linguists and anthropologists, the only way to discover this 'hidden culture' is to hear what Norwegians' evaluations of their experiences with other cultures say about their own unwritten expectations. I have chosen extracts from blogs and personal communications, presented as six 'cases', that might provide an alternative perspective on the 'shyness' evaluated as impolite above.

Case 1: A Norwegian exchange student⁸ writes: 'I am an exchange student in Texas [...] People here, who have never met me before, say hi to me in the shops and on the street. It can be a bit much. As a Norwegian, I am used to being able to do my groceries without having to chat with people I will never see again. [...] In the school corridor many say 'sup' to me and it took me some time to realise that I did not have to stop and answer every time.'

Case 2: A Norwegian exchange student in Canada⁹ writes: 'When I went to the shop the first week [in Canada], a man talked to me as if we were old friends. I chatted on while I was trying to remember where I had met him before. Finally, I realised that he was just one of the shop assistants!'

Case 3: A Norwegian exchange student in Tanzania¹⁰ writes: 'Amalie and I sat on a bench in the park when a guy came up to us and asked us the usual questions about what we are doing here, where we are going and how long we plan to stay in Tanzania, etc. But then he continued to tell us about his family background; he was from Kenya, his father was a Tanzanian, but he had never met him. Still, he had managed to fool the Tanzanian government to obtain a Tanzanian birth certificate and become a Tanzanian citizen. No one would have done this in Norway, and then I don't talk about fooling the government, but to walk up to a complete stranger and just start to talk about yourself!'

⁸ Reader's comment to: Skårderud, J. (2013, March 18) Nordmenn: Hyggelige nok [Norwegians: Friendly enough]. Retrieved from <http://skaarderud.blogspot.no/2013/03/nordmenn-hyggelige-nok.html>

⁹ Retrieved from UiO University of Oslo student webpage: <http://www.hf.uio.no/studier/blogg/reise/filosofi-idehistorie/london-ontario/linnea-margrethe-sahlgaard/to-maneder-i-canada.html>

¹⁰ Retrieved from <http://spor.bloggnorge.com/page/13/>

The following come from previous research that might help explain the underlying values guiding Norwegian students' evaluations of their international experiences. The term *script* here refers to a person's culture, i.e. pre-knowledge and beliefs, as explained above.

Possible scripts: Lakoff (1973) describes the distance rule of politeness being 'to avoid imposition on the addressee by wasting his time with meandering or trivia' (p. 303), that is, to avoid rambling on about nothing in particular. In Rygg (2016), where I looked at Norwegian reactions to Emily's letter (cf. the introduction), I found that a) Norwegians are not prone to phatic talk (greetings and small talk) with strangers, and b) there are Norwegians who distrust using words merely for social purposes, because it is considered impolite to excessively impose on other people without having something proper (truthful, informational) to say. Similarly, the three exchange students' surprised reactions reveal that talk just for social purposes – especially on personal topics – with strangers is not expected and, thus, different in Norway. Further, in Rygg (2017), where I look at changes in Norwegian greeting rituals over the last hundred years, I find that even greetings, ideally, should have an informational content. Thus, a greeting such as '*hvordan har du det?*' or 'how are you' is only used with people one already knows to ask about their actual well-being, different from how the greetings 'how are you' or 'sup' (what's up?) are understood in the United States. That is why the boy in case 1 has to resist the urge to stop and give a proper answer.

Case 4 (borrowed from Abe Auestad in Aambø, 2005, p. 188): A Norwegian master student of Japanese found that when staying with Japanese families in Japan, they tended to worry about every little detail for him: 'Here is the bedroom and here is the switch, the toilet works like this...'. He understood that it was done out of good will, but he sometimes felt it collided with his need to manage on his own.

Case 5 (personal communication with a student in a class on intercultural communication): A former Ethiopian, now a Norwegian national, was in Ethiopia on holiday. He loved being around family and old friends but sometimes went to his room to relax. His relatives worried and came to inquire if something were the matter, 'Was he ill, perhaps?' 'That is when I realised how Norwegian I've become', he laughingly commented.

Case 6 (personal communication with colleague): A Norwegian scholar was taking her sabbatical at a university in Great Britain. Remembering her mom's frequent advice about '*å ikke hefte folk*' (not to take up other's time), she hesitated to greet the already busy-looking senior executive officer when passing her office in the mornings.

Possible scripts: Norwegian anthropologist Gullestad (1992) argues that '*selvstendighet*' and '*uavhengighet*', or 'self-sufficiency, independence' are key notions of Norwegian individualism, and that this is connected with values of self-control (not to bother others/manage on one's own) and the belief that people need 'peace and quiet' [*fred og ro*] (p. 184ff.). Similarly, the student in Japan in case 4 needed to feel that he managed on his own, and the student visiting Ethiopia in case 5 wanted some time to himself. The other side of the coin is when Norwegians believe that others need the same. Thus, when I worked as a tour guide for Japanese tourists in Bergen and was told to remember to tell my Japanese guests to mind their step or to make sure not to leave their umbrella behind, I embarrassingly felt they must think I was treating them like children. Norwegian management style is marked by leaders who downplay their authority, delegate tasks and expect employees to make independent assessments and find solutions on their own (Smith et al., 2003; Grenness, 2003). However, when politeness is guided by the belief that people like to be left alone, there are also linguistic implications, as in case 6. The woman was afraid to disturb the executive officer, but by not greeting her good morning, she might have been considered somewhat impolite. The underlying values in the six cases are further discussed in the final section.

Professional impoliteness

The last matter I will discuss from Aambø (2005) is something that could be placed under the collective term 'professional politeness' because it is linked to a specific profession. Abe Auestad (in Aambø, 2005), originally used to Japanese professional service, complains: "It is not at all comfortable to be a customer in Norway!" (p. 192ff.).

Having experienced Japanese professional politeness first-hand for a couple of years, it is difficult not to agree with Abe Auestad that it is extremely comfortable to be a customer in Japan. The shop assistants use extra-polite language towards customers and are always ready to serve with a smile. The transitional period in Norway in the 1970s, when young people rejected elite culture, resulted in the disappearance of many earlier lexical markers of polite customer service. Norwegians working in the service industry in the 1950s and 60s recall¹¹ greeting their customers with 'herr'/'Mr', 'fru'/'Mrs', 'frøken'/'Miss' and professional titles such as 'Doctor' and 'Professor'. However, there were also shop assistants who feared being fired because, coming from the countryside where the formal address form 'De' was not in use, they had forgotten to use it with an infuriated customer. Thus, as presented earlier, the informants were glad to be rid of markers of social hierarchy. The lack of such markers today, however, might result in younger service workers being deemed impolite. However, it is not the lack of lexical forms of politeness that causes Abe Auestad (2005) to react, but rather the lack of 'serviceinnstilling' or 'a service-minded attitude' (p. 193), a term associated with being customer friendly, which raises the question of what it means to be friendly or polite in this context. The following feature story,¹² seen from a Norwegian shop assistant's point of view, provides a thought-provoking perspective on the matter.

Monica, a young female shop assistant working in a fashion store, says she feels as if she is hunting wild animals at work. Usually the customers hurriedly utter 'jeg bare ser' or 'just looking' even before she has managed to approach them. She knows that if she does not give them leeway, then they will try to escape the awkward situation and flee the store. One explanation provided in the story is that people are brought up to help but not to receive help (cf. 'the norm of reciprocity', Gouldner, 1960). Stress comes from the fact that, if they receive the shop assistant's friendly courtesy, they will feel obliged to repay the favour, preferably by buying something. The friendlier the shop assistant is, the greater the pressure. Another explanation is that customers might feel that their personal space is being invaded because if they wanted such intrusion (assistance), they would ask for it. In this light, it may not be so strange that Monica keeps in the background to the extent that, to people with other expectations, she might seem not to notice customers. Bailey (2000) portrayed how African Americans and Korean Americans had very different expectations about what it means to be customer friendly. Monica's story indicates that, even though she would have liked to be more outgoing, the customers' reactions guided her to believe that it would be more customer friendly to leave them alone.

Gouldner (1960) argues that 'the obligations imposed by the norms of reciprocity may vary with the status of the participants within a society' (p. 171). Thus, even though reciprocity is also frequently mentioned as an important norm among people in East Asia (Yum, 1988), the fact that Japanese sellers and customers are not on the same footing (Rygg, 2015) might make it easier to take shop assistants' service for granted without feeling the need to reciprocate the favour. In the story above, however, the Norwegian customers seem to be guided by the kind of Nordic egalitarianism that Gullestad (2002) describes as equality based on sameness. Thus, what might upset Norwegian customers is not the absence of humble

¹¹ From the survey data from NEG - Norsk etnologisk gransking on greetings and address forms.

¹² Landrø, J. & Flå, E. Føler meg som en hyene på jakt [Feel like a hunting hyena]. (2013, April 7). Retrieved from NRK Trøndelag online http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/distrikt/nrk_trondelag/1.10974596.

subservience on the part of a shop assistant, but rather when they are not being treated as an equal but instead kept waiting or ignored.

This being said, Komarova (in Aambø, 2005), originally from Russia, has a diametrically different impression of Norwegian service. She enjoys shopping in Norway because the shop assistants are so friendly and smiling. Her perspective reminds me of a student report written by one of my Russian students about her first impression of passing Norwegians in the street:

In the beginning I thought everyone I met was in a good mood or at least that they had some reason to smile. After a while, I realised that their happy faces had nothing to do with their mood but are how they look when they are thinking about nothing in particular. (p. 214)

Komarova (in Aambø, 2005, p. 214) explains how, when she goes on holiday in Russia and smiles at people on the bus, she is given odd looks and occasionally receives a negative comment. Abe Auestad and Komarova's very different evaluations of Norwegian professional service illustrate, more than anything, that recipients' expectations guide their ascription of (im)politeness, not the serviceperson's intent.

Discussion and conclusion

The research question 1: 'When do the immigrants (in Aambø, 2005) find Norwegians impolite?' was answered above. However, the second research question: 'Is the behaviour found in RQ1 a sign of Norwegian indifference towards normal politeness?' has yet to be thoroughly discussed. As mentioned before, one of the authors in Aambø (2005) states: 'It seems that the ability to be friendly and behave politely towards strangers is not among the social abilities that Norwegians value the most' (p. 75).

The question becomes, what does it mean to be friendly and polite? From a linguistic theoretical viewpoint, a number of studies have refuted the notion of universal politeness. If it did exist, a book called *Typically Norwegian to Be Impolite* would indicate a people intent on being impolite and, consequently, a bunch of rude inhabitants. Instead, the stand taken in this article is that the evaluation of politeness is not dependent on universal standards but rather relies on the observer's expectations, guided by his or her values or 'script'. Misunderstandings are caused when the speaker's and the hearer's scripts differ (Escandell-Vidal, 1996). The fact that some of these conflicts are out-of-awareness to many Norwegians complicates the matter.

Above, we saw that Norwegians were deemed impolite when they do not apologise or excuse themselves. A Norwegian exchange student returning from the UK writes in her blog¹³ that 'you know that you have lived in England for a while when you say "sorry" even though it wasn't *actually* your fault'. The fact that she does notice how often the word 'sorry' is used in England indicates that she carries other expectations with her from home. Thus, even though the Norwegian language has at least two lexical items, '*unnskyld*' and '*beklager*', equivalent to the English word 'sorry', they seem to be less frequently used. Witoszek (2001) calls this 'communicative stinginess', as if Norwegians consciously and spitefully refrain from using polite phrases. However, another interpretation is that conventional lexical forms of politeness are given less weight when it is considered more polite not to talk at all unless one has something 'proper' (truthful, informational) to say (see section: Informal impoliteness).

That is, if we look at all the examples in the previous section, some underlying values might be related to a distance rule of politeness, as laid out by Lakoff (1973). Politeness is reflected in a hesitation to disturb people with excessive talk, especially strangers (cases 1-3), not disturbing people with things one can manage on one's own (case 4), not disturbing people by taking up their time (case 6), and, for shop assistants, not disturbing customers who have

¹³ Retrieved from <https://stineienland.wordpress.com/>

not asked for help. These values are guided not by indifference or intentional impoliteness but by consideration for others' autonomy and personal space.

However, the fact that foreigners living in Norway find this difficult and see it as a display of indifference instead of consideration must also be taken seriously. The Argentinian Pájaro (in Aambø, 2005, p. 267) says that although Argentinians normally talk until they are interrupted, she knows she must pause when she talks to her Norwegian friends. If she does not, they will just listen politely until she has finished and never get a chance to talk. When people's informal culture becomes in-awareness to them, they also have the option to consciously diverge from their 'script'. To Norwegians with the distance politeness norms portrayed above, this would involve taking the initiative to talk to strangers because of the positive evaluation such an act would receive. Flexibility is perhaps the most sought-after ability in a multicultural society, for both natives and immigrants alike.

Some might feel that the distance norms portrayed thus far do not apply to them. As mentioned in the introduction, it is highly unlikely that all Norwegian nationals carry exactly the same 'script'. For instance, nowadays Norwegian teenage girls are reportedly¹⁴ using positive politeness expressions such as '*beste*'/'(you're) the best', '*vakreste*'/'(you're) the most beautiful' and '*elsker deg for alltid*'/'love you forever' with their online girlfriends regardless of whether they mean it or not. Lately, there has been a discussion about adult female business associates who 'cheer each other on' (give each other compliments) on social media. Critics have called this '*sukkerspinn*'/'candyfloss' dialogues¹⁵, as if it were something sweet but slightly nonsensical. However, it raises the question of whether these are indications that small talk and compliments just for social purposes are becoming more common. Future research may show whether these examples indicate a change in Norwegian communicative norms, or whether they are just styles limited to certain groups, situations or online communication channels.

¹⁴ Wien, H. & Mejlbo, K. Hjerte-flom blant unge jenter i sosiale medier [Heart pouring among young girls on the social media]. (2014, April 1). Budstikka. Retrieved from: <http://www.budstikka.no/nyheter/hjerte-flom-blant-unge-jenter-i-sosiale-medier-1.8362143>

¹⁵ Grinde, E. Rosa sukkerspinn [Pink candyfloss]. (2014, March 16). Dagens Næringsliv. Retrieved from: <http://www.dn.no/jobbleidelse/2014/03/16/Endelig-mandag/rosa-sukkerspinn>

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