

(Im)politeness in Grammar: A Cross-linguistic Study of English and Burmese

Wai Yan Min Oo¹ *  / Vaskó Ildikó² *

¹*3rd Year PhD Student in Linguistic Sciences/ Intercultural Linguistics, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary; Assistant Lecturer, Department of English, Mandalay University of Foreign Languages, Mandalay, Myanmar
E-mail: waiyanminoo@student.elte.hu

Orchid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8343-8432>

²*Associate Professor with Habilitation, Head of Department, Department of Scandinavian Studies, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary
E-mail: vasko.ildiko@btk.elte.hu

Received: August 16, 2024
Revised: November 20, 2024
Accepted: November 21, 2024

Abstract

This research focuses on how the phenomenon of (im) politeness innately embedded in grammar. It is aimed at presenting the commonalities and differences in the grammatical descriptions of (im)politeness in English and Burmese (Myanmar) languages cross-linguistically. Grammatical descriptions related to (im)politeness are studied from the point of view of Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory of grammatical features. A descriptive comparative research design is employed, and the text-driven elicitation method (Podesva and Sharma, 2013) is used for the data collection based on the English grammar books, Burmese (Myanmar) grammar books, and linguistic research on the Burmese (Myanmar) language. The results in this study not only provide the grammatical descriptions of (im) politeness but also point out the incomprehensiveness of Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory of grammatical features. From the point of view of the inventory of grammatical features, it is found that five grammatical features (Person, Respect, Tense, Aspect, and Mood) are related to (im)politeness. In addition, other four grammatical features related to (im)politeness (Conditionals, Imperative, Yes/no and short answers, and Question), which do not fit into the inventory of (im)politeness, are also investigated. Compared with the English language, the Burmese (Myanmar) language has fewer grammatical features of (im)politeness. It is hoped that this paper reinforces to a certain extent the new study area of (im)politeness from the grammatical side which is initiated by Culpeper (n.d.) and sheds light on the process of developing grammatical features inventory.

Keywords: English, grammar, (im)politeness, grammatical features inventory, Burmese (Myanmar)

Introduction

Pragmatics as the branch of linguistics provides the speakers' meaning and contextual meaning (Yule, 1996) that cannot be paved way by semantics and its previous linguistic fields. Yule (1996) laid out eight contents apart from the definition of pragmatics as the elements related to it. All of them such as implicatures, presupposition, and speech acts are related to one manifestation of pragmatics to some extent, that is politeness. When there is a loophole in pragmatic maxims and theories, politeness is the field that gives the suitable and most relevant and comprehensive explanations for that leakages. On the other hand, the field of pragmatics is metaphorically entitled as the wastebasket of linguistics in which every language matter can fit. Thus, it can be said as "Among linguistics, pragmatics, Among pragmatics, politeness".

Like the earlier principles of pragmatics, Lakoff (1973) devised the very first politeness theory and started the prolonged controversial field of politeness, and Kadar and Haugh's (2013) framework of understanding politeness is the latest framework regarding the field. Throughout these fifty years, politeness as the subject of research and linguistic field to be discussed never wane its potential but seduce more attraction from various scholars around the world within and outside of the field of linguistics. Numerous scholars such as Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983, 2014), Brown and Levison (1978, 1987), Culpeper (1996, 2005, 2011), Bousfield (2008), and Kadar and Haugh (2013) proposed tangible theories, frameworks, and maxims related to politeness as well as impoliteness. Politeness has been theorized from the point of universality, speech acts, culture, face, value, speaker, analyst, layman, and hearer. From utterances to discourse levels, it has been studied.

According to Kadar (2017), the theories and ideology of politeness can be divided into three waves sprung from the criticisms and refurbishments of previous theories. The first wave is based on Gricean's cooperative principle (1975) and the production of politeness in which Brown and Levison's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness is unparalleled and the most comprehensive framework of politeness theory proposed. Brown and Levison's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness regarded some expressions such as "could you..." as the intrinsically polite forms. Eelen (2001) initiated the second wave which ideology is the discursive approach counting hearers and laymen into the stakeholders of politeness. In this wave, the ideas launched by the first-wave scholars are criticized and opposed by the pretexts like different contexts and cultures. No exception goes to the linguistic expressions of (im) politeness. Millis (2005) argued that no linguistic forms always have politeness and impoliteness. Kadar (2017) claimed the third wave which tries to explore politeness more than studying its production and evaluation. Though it is mentioned that the politeness research and its theories have been to its third wave, and politeness has been studied from many facets, there is no study of politeness from the point of grammar. In addition, politeness is studied from the point of users, not from the language expressions used by those users.

Among the distinguished scholars of (im)politeness, only Culpeper (n.d.) recognized the role of grammar in impoliteness. Culpeper (n.d.) mentioned that (im)politeness sense is assumed as not intrinsic to linguistic form. There are several statements ignoring the role of language in discussing politeness (e.g. Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2011). Due to the heavy focus on the contexts and users (Mills, 2003, Locher, 2006, Kadar and Haugh, 2013 and Kadar, 2017) launched by the second wave of

politeness research initiated by Eelen (2001), the role of language or linguistic form has not gained the attention so far. The word “grammar of politeness” is also used by Pan (2011) in order to label her approach to analyzing East Asian politeness “situational-oriented methodological approach”. But this use of the term “grammar of politeness” does not mean the grammatical expression of politeness, but it covers the situational and contextual elements. She also pointed out that language is not the main factor that can decide polite behaviors. This statement also implies the need to study politeness from the grammatical side. It can be assumed that without language, humans cannot describe anything, not as politeness. Here, no one can firmly deny that linguistic forms are not totally important in deciding an utterance or a sentence (im)polite or not (Kecskes, 2014).

There are words and more complex structures that are, to varying degrees, conventionally associated with (im)politeness, according to scholars like Terkourafi (2005) and Culpeper (2011). These scholars also contend that no account of (im)politeness can be complete without a thorough understanding of the role of actual linguistic form in it. In other words, they believe that (im)politeness has more to do with language than just socio-pragmatic factors and may even have its own grammar. From the aforementioned points, it is significant that the study of the grammatical expressions of (im)politeness is deserved attention and it is also uncharted territory. As it is presented, much of the existing literature on (im)politeness mainly focuses on its users, context, and cultures. Culpeper (n.d.) stated that only a few attempts the research for the understanding of grammatical impoliteness.

This study seeks the grammatical expressions which are intrinsically (im)polite in the English and Burmese (Myanmar) language. Here, Culpeper (n.d.) made a question related to the methodology of the establishment of a grammatical expression as the conventionalized expression for impoliteness. He pointed out that less reliability is there in the limited number of native speakers’ intuitions, and suggested two types of data such as using the questionnaire data in the form of the judgment on (im)politeness, or using more experimental evidence. In order not to employ the disqualified data from the judgments of Culpeper (n.d.), the grammatical expressions relating to (im)politeness elicited only from the grammar books, and linguistic research is used.

Research Objectives

Based on the theoretical gap mentioned in previous section, this current study aims to present the commonalities and differences in the grammatical descriptions of (im)politeness in English and Burmese (Myanmar) languages cross-linguistically.

In order to reach the aforementioned aim, the objectives are set as in the following:

1. To seek the grammatical features of (im)politeness in the English and Burmese (Myanmar) languages
2. To redress the neglected linguistic study in the (im)politeness field
3. To address the shared grammatical features of (im)politeness

Literature Review

The grammar of a natural language is a set of structural rules that limit how sentences, phrases, and words can be put together by speakers or authors. The phrase can also be used to describe the study of such restrictions, a subject area that covers phonology, morphology, and syntax as well as the frequently added fields of phonetics, semantics, and pragmatics. The book by Panther et al. (2009) works on metonymy and metaphor from the grammatical point of view. In the field of (im)politeness, the idea of studying impoliteness was initiated by Culpeper (n.d.). Politeness from this point of view is still uncharted territory to be studied. The concepts and operation of politeness are diverse based on the different cultures (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2001; Kadar & Haugh, 2013). The dictionary definitions of politeness in the two studied languages are also differed. Politeness (2023) cited from the Cambridge Dictionary website describes “politeness” as “keeping good relations with your listener or reader. There are two types of politeness such as showing the listener or reader that you value and respect them and changing or softening what you say so as not to be too direct or forceful.” Myanmar dictionary summary (Vol.3, Pa-ya) (1979) defined “Politeness” as “gentle, urbane, and elegant behaviors, not having rudeness”. The present study emphasizes grammar from the point of pragmatics, exactly from the (im)politeness by using the two languages, Burmese (Myanmar) and English.

Several researchers employ features, the components into which linguistic units, like words, can be divided, in their quest to understand language. NUMBER (single, plural, dual,...), PERSON (1st, 2nd, 3rd), and TENSE are a few examples of characteristics (present, past, ...) (“Grammatical Features Inventory”, 2023). Kibort & Greville (2008) proposed the grammatical features inventory including three types such as Morphosyntactic features, morphosemantic features, and morphological features. A feature whose values are connected to either agreement or government is referred to as morphosyntactic.

A morphosemantic feature is one whose values are solely inherent, and those features are unrelated to agreement or government. In other words, the elements on which the values are discovered are not agreement controllers. A morphosemantic property is irrelevant to syntax because it is not involved in either agreement or government. A characteristic that values are solely inherent and unrelated to agreement or government is referred to as a purely morphological feature.

Table 1

Inventory of Grammatical Features (Kibort & Greville, 2008)

Morphosyntactic	Morphosemantic	Morphological
1. Gender	1. Tense	1. Inflectional class
2. Number	2. Aspect	2. Stem index
3. Person	3. Mood	3. Syncretic index
4. Case	4. Polarity	4. Morphological specification
5. Respect	5. Transitivity	
6. Definiteness	6. Diathesis and voice	
	7. Evidentiality	
	8. Screeve	

Table 1 (Continued)

Morphosyntactic	Morphosemantic	Morphological
	9. Associativity	
	10. Question word dependency	

According to Kibort and Greville (2008), the feature of “respect” is about politeness. One of the overt linguistic expressions of politeness is "respect" or "address." It conveys the speaker's social relationship (including familiarity) and attitude toward the addressee, as well as occasionally toward other people. The Brown and Levinson (1987) theory based on the social-psychological concept of face is the most frequently recognized explanation of the causes of the occurrence of linguistic politeness, including "respect" or "address." According to Brown and Levinson, each person's face corresponds to their "public self-image," or how they want to be perceived and treated by other members of society. According to Brown and Levinson, there are several speech acts and utterances that could endanger the addressee's face wishes, which is why linguistic expressions of politeness emerge.

Kibort and Greville (2008) proposed three loci of special linguistic forms of respect based on Shibatani's (1994) description of honorific systems as follows.

1. Referent

Language expressions that show respect for nominal referents are used to encode politeness. Such forms are the most frequently used in politeness systems, and the historical evolution of some honorific systems (such as the Japanese system) suggests that this is the most fundamental type of honorific. The referent expressions in this group consist of:

1. titles (such as honorary titles used together with proper names in English or German; or honorific endings attaching to names in Korean or Japanese),
2. polite pronouns (special pronominal forms - often across the whole person paradigm, as in Javanese; pronoun substitution - e.g. plural for singular; or pronoun avoidance and substitution of title, kin term, etc. for pronoun),
3. nominal honorifics (or, honorified nouns, expressing respect either directly towards the referent or indirectly towards the owner/creator/recipient of the referred object; these are much less common than titles or polite pronouns),
4. verbal honorifics (sometimes called 'subject honorifics': honorifics expressing respect towards the referent of the subject or actor nominal and found on the verb; these include: verbal affixes, suppletive verbal honorific forms as in Japanese, Korean, and Tibetan, honorified nominalisations as in Japanese, and honorified predicate adjectives as in Japanese).

2. Addressee

Linguistic structures that convey respect from the speaker to the addressee serve as a code for politeness. Although the reference honorific function and the addressee honorific functions converge in the case of honorific second-person pronouns, several languages have unique addressee-oriented honorific forms. They consist of:

1. special words of address (e.g. English)
2. special particles (e.g. Tagalog, Thai, Tamil)
3. special verbal endings (e.g. Korean; Japanese)

3. Avoidance language

When speaking to a "taboo" relative or a superior or while using a distinct language variety in their presence, politeness is encoded. Examples include the so-called "mother-in-law" or "brother-in-law" languages of Australia. For instance, the language Dyirbal has two dialects: the "everyday" dialect Guwal, and the "mother-in-law" dialect Dyalnguy, which must be used by the speaker when a taboo relative, such as a parent-in-law of the opposite sex, is present. Avoidance languages may be less wordy, use more generic vocabulary, and exhibit other linguistic traits typical of honorific languages. As an attempt to put the notion of linguistic features on the (im)politeness of two languages, the inventory mentioned here is to be used as the theoretical background.

Material and Method

The grammatical descriptions of (im)politeness are used as the qualitative data in this research. Text-driven elicitation method (Podesva and Sharma, 2013) is used in collecting the required data. Podesva and Sharma (2013) said "This can be used to examine a single feature (subordinate clauses, for example) or for developing a comprehensive grammar." They are taken from English grammar books, articles on politeness, Burmese (Myanmar) grammar book, and researches on Burmese linguistics. The research design is a Descriptive comparative research design. According to Cantrell (2011), a descriptive-comparative research design is intended to describe the differences among groups in a population without manipulating the independent variable.

The procedure for the research started by eliciting grammatical features related to (im)politeness in each language from the abovementioned sources. The investigated grammatical features are studied from the point of the grammatical features inventory by Kibort and Greville, (2008). The discussion and adding more information about the investigated grammatical features are also made based on the findings from various sources. After that, the collected grammatical features from each language are compared and deduced to the commonalities and differences among them. Apart from exploring whether the grammatical features in the above table have the sense of (im)politeness or not in the investigated languages, the feature "Respect" in the morphosyntactic feature which is all about politeness is discussed based on the data of two languages.

Results and Discussion

The present study is about the (im)politeness in the grammar of the English language and the Burmese language. Since this study is about grammar features that are innately (im)polite, the discussion and data are not counted on the role of context. Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory of grammatical features is deployed as the theoretical background to elicit whether (im)politeness presides in these features. Kibort and Greville's (2008) confessed that their inventory is an attempt to describe the grammatical features and detailed explanations are still lacking in some of the features such as Polarity, and Question Word Dependency. Although the results and their

respective discussions are as mentioned in the following, the most obvious finding of this research is that this research can reinforce that Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory of grammatical features are not comprehensive and some grammatical features attached by (im)politeness in the two studied languages are not fit in any of the grammatical features in the inventory.

(Im)politeness in the grammar of the Burmese (Myanmar) language

1. Politeness distinctions in pronouns

Johannes (2013) described "Politeness distinctions in pronouns" by especially focusing on the second-person pronouns of the languages. In the Burmese (Myanmar) language, politeness distinctions are embedded in all three types of pronouns (first person, second person, third person). There are manifold distinctions in each first, second, and third-person pronoun of the Burmese language. The following 20 pronouns referring to the persons are collected from Myanmar Grammar (2013) and Johannes (2013). 2 out of those 20 pronouns (သူမ/thuma/ and ယူ/ju/) are not described in these two sources but are widely used in the daily communication in current Myanmar. The pronoun "ယူ/ju/" was mentioned Johannes' (2013) list of pronouns, but not "သူမ/thuma/". His list of pronouns was cited from Okell (1969). At the time, it is possible that the use of the pronoun "သူမ/thuma/" has not occurred. The reason for Myanmar grammar exclusion of these two pronouns is explained by a professor in Myanmar (Burmese) as that he will not accept it as the Burmese pronoun since it is a translated form of the English pronoun "she". The pronoun "ယူ/ju/" comes from the English pronoun "you" and it is assumed as the same case as the pronoun "သူမ/thuma/".

Table 2

Pronouns in Burmese (Myanmar) Language

No.	First person pronoun	Second person pronoun	Third person pronoun
1.	ငါ /nga/	သူ/thu/	သူ/thu/
2.	ကျွန်တော် /kjundo/	သူမ/thuma/	သူမ/thuma/
3.	ကျွန်မ /kjama/	မင်း/min:/	သင်း /thin:/
4.	ကျုပ်/kjou'/	ရှင်/shin/	Personal pronouns (Family terms such as brother, sister,..)
5.	ကျွန်ုပ် /kjanou'/	ခင်ဗျား/khamja:/	
6.	မိမိ/mimi/	နင်/nin/	
7.	တပည့်တော် /dabjito/	ညည်း/nji:/	

Table 2 (Continued)

No.	First person pronoun	Second person pronoun	Third person pronoun
8.	တပည့်တော်မ /dabjitoma/	သင်/thin/	
9.	Personal pronouns (Family terms such as brother, sister,..)	အရှင်ဘုရား/ashin hpaja:/	
10.		ယု/ju/	
11.		Personal pronouns (Family terms such as brother, sister,..)	

The politeness in the use of pronouns is varied depending mainly on the addressee's status and age. Although the familiarity between the interlocutors is assumed to be the neutralizer to the impoliteness sense of a certain pronoun, this is not the real decisive factor in deciding the use of a certain politeness. There are many examples of the depletion of social interaction in which the impolite pronoun is used due to the familiarity between the interlocutors and this leads to the adverse situation of communication. Thus, in this paper, in deciding the politeness distinction among the pronouns, the factor of "familiarity among the interlocutors" is excluded. In this way, the avoidance of seven pronouns colored with red in Table 2 can be regarded as the polite usage of pronouns. According to Johannes (2013), languages in the Southeast Asian region have the feature of "pronoun avoidance". They have many forms of pronouns that are impolite usages.

2. Particle

Gartner (2005) mentioned the particle of the Burmese language named "ပါ/pa/" is defined as the politeness particle. In example (a), the sense of definiteness is gained by using the politeness particle "ပါ/pa/" with a creaky tone.

(a)

မောင်	သစ္စာ	ထားခဲ့ပါမယ်။
maung	thitsar	htarkhaepamal
maun	thi'sa	hta:khepame
I-1SG.M	faith-N	keep-REM.DEFINITE.IRR

'I will remain faithful to you!' (Gartner, 2005)

The common Politeness marker of the Burmese language "ပါ/pa/" is regarded as a particle (Myanmar-English dictionary, 1996). The particle "ပါ/pa/" is mentioned as the politeness marker by Vittrant (2005). Normally, the absence of the

polite particle “ပါ /pa/” means impoliteness in the Burmese context (see the example sentence b).

(b)

သား	တို့	သမီး	တို့	ထဲ	က	တစ်	ယော	လော	ကျောက်သင်ပု	က	စာ	တွေ	ဖျက်	ပေး	ပါ	လား။
							က်	က်	နံး							
thar	tot	thamee	tot	htae	ka	ta	yout	lout	kyaukthinponka		sar	tway	phat	pae	par	lar
									e							
tha:	tou	thami:	tou	the:	ka	ti'	jau'	lau'	kjau'thinbou	ka	sa	twai	hpje	pei:	pa	la:
									n:							
son-N		you-PRON.PL		daughter-N		you-PRON.PL	PPM	PPM	one-N	CLF	PAR		whiteboard-N	PPM	letter-N	PAR
													wipe out-V		PAR	POM
																could-Q

‘Could the one from sons and daughters wipe out the letters on the whiteboard?’

3. Conditionals

Tun (2005) described that showing modesty is assumed as polite in Burmese culture. This modesty includes the use of language indirectly as in (c). The most common indirect way of expressing the statement is using the conditional. In (c), the interviewer is trying to ask his question indirectly, displaying politeness. In other words, this shows that expressing indirectly in this language associates with politeness. In addition, Oo (2023) also presented that Burmese language users employ questions as a method of request instead of direct statements.

(c)

အကို	အတွက်	ကတယ်	လို့	ပေါ့	ပြောရမယ်	ဆိုရင်	ဘယ်ဟာ	ပြောမလဲ	အကို
akoueatwe'ka	dageloupo	pjo:iamehsoujin	beha	pjo:maile:	akou				
brother.for	really.pot	say.must.IRR.say.ifwhich.		say.IRR.Q	brother				
			thing						

' So for you, if you really had to say, what would you talk about?' (Tun, 2005)

4. Imperative

The imperative in the Burmese language is marked with particles စမ်း/san:/ and စေ/sei/ as in example (d). But the imperative only with the particle စမ်း/san:/ is impolite. Without this particle, the imperative is depleted and becomes nonsense. The facts pointed out by Olmen (2018) in which negative imperative also creates the impoliteness expression like “don’t you dare V”, and by Lodaira (2021) in which the use of imperative with “let’s” is polite in the case of giving feedback and an invitation are also true for the Burmese language. In the Burmese language, the same expression as “let’s” is စေ/sou/.

(d)

လူ

lou
Do.V
Do.

စမ်း

san:
PAR

(Im) politeness in the grammar of the English language

In the English language, politeness is concerned with being less direct, and softening the illocutionary force of the speech acts (Masterclass: Being Polite: How to soften your English, 2023). That is why its grammar features on politeness focus on the use of less direct and vague forms, and also link with the degree of politeness. In English, politeness is mainly related to the formal/official situations or strangers. Normally, the simple act of adding the word “please” to sentences decorates them politely. Yule (1996) also mentioned that in English, indirect speech acts typically have higher levels of politeness than direct speech acts.

1. Politeness distinctions in pronouns

According to Johannes (2013), there are no politeness distinctions between pronouns in the English language. On the other hand, the second person pronoun “you” is clearly linked to impoliteness expressions such as an insult as in “You bastard!” (Culpeper, n.d.).

2. Modal verbs and modal expressions

Eastwood (2002) claimed that using a modal verb occasionally makes the message less direct and, as a result, more hesitant and polite. In talking about the rules, the use of “should” is more polite and less emphatic and it is used as an alternative to “must”. The use of “would” makes the statement polite even when the speaker is disagreeing with someone. Other expressions containing the modal verb “would” like “would like” and “would like to” also make less direct statements. Alternatively, some modal verbs, particularly the past tense of *can*, *may*, *shall*, and *will* (*could*, *might*, *should*, and *would*), can be used to be more polite or less blunt. Other modal phrases are also available (certainly, possibility, be likely to, be supposed to be) when making a request for something or asking someone to perform a task are done (Politeness, 2023).

For example,

- a. *I'd advise you to see a solicitor.*
- b. *Passengers should check in at least one hour before departure time.*
- c. *I would point out that this has caused us some inconvenience.*
- d. *I'd like a drink.* (less direct, more polite)

3. Imperative

Using imperative in some speech situations such as making someone be quiet or leave is impolite (Eastwood, 2002). Negative imperative also creates the impoliteness expression like “don’t you dare V” (Olmen, 2018). For example, *Shut up*. On the one hand, Lodaira (2021) pointed out that the use of imperative with “let’s” is polite in the case of giving feedback and an invitation such as “*Let’s double-check the details on the invoice before we process the shipment.*” and “*Let’s go jogging tomorrow morning.*”

4. Yes/no and short answers

Eastwood (2002) mentioned that replying “yes/no or a short answer” to questions in some contexts especially in replying to the request is swaying from politeness. For example, *Were you late? ~ Yes, I missed the bus.*

5. Tense

The use of past tense or past continuous tense in the contexts like request, suggestion, and questions or certain grammatical features like conditional clauses reflect the speaker’s attitude by making more distant from the hearer, leading to politeness (Eastwood, 2002). Moreover, Politeness (2023) argued that in order to be more polite or less blunt, the past verb form is occasionally employed to refer to the present. Sometimes, this way of using past form is attached with the use of the verbs like “hope,” “think,” “desire,” and “wonder”. Using the past continuous here instead of the past simple means adding extra politeness to the proposition.

For example,

- a. *Have you a moment? I want to ask you something.*
- b. *Have you a moment? I wanted to ask you something.* (Eastwood, 2002)
- c. Direct: *‘Pick me up on your way to the party this evening!’*

More polite: *‘I was wondering if you could give me a lift later.’* (Masterclass: Being Polite: How to soften your English, 2023)

Politeness (2023) also presented that past verb form is sometimes used in formal contexts and in the shop and other service situations to be polite.

In formal contexts,

A: Did you want another coffee.

In the shop and other service situation.

Sales Assistant: What was the name please?

6. Conditionals

Conditional types 1 and 2 can be used for describing possible future actions. Politeness (2023) claimed the use of the conditional type 1 with can, and will is polite. In this case, Eastwood (2002) stated that it is more polite to use the type 2 pattern. For instance,

- a. Type 1: Will it be OK if I bring a friend? (less tentative)
- b. Type 2: Would it be OK if I brought a friend” (more tentative, more polite)

7. Question

In English, there are three structural forms (declarative, interrogative, and imperative) and they have direct relations to the respective general communicative uses (statement, question, and command/request) (Yule, 1996). When the structural forms and communicative uses are exchangeable in the use, and this leads to less direct and being politeness. In other words, the use of questions in the case of request is polite (Masterclass: Being Polite: How to soften your English, 2023). For example,

a. *'Aren't you kind of young to be getting married?'*

In speaking, asking two questions rather than one is less direct and polite in which the very first question is the general one or introducing the topic for the interlocutor and the second one is for the specific question (Politeness, 2023). For instance,

A. Do you like sport? I mean, do you play sport?

B. Yeah. I play basketball. I'm on the school team.

7.1 Negative question with a question tag

The statements of the speaker like in the speech act of request can be softer by employing a negative question with a question tag (Masterclass: Being Polite: How to soften your English, 2023). For example,

a. *'You **couldn't** give me a lift later, **could you?**'*












b. *'I **don't** suppose you could pick me up tonight, **could you?**'*

Respect

The presence of honorary titles in the English language is already mentioned by Kibort and Greville (2008). They are the titles prefixing a person's name such as Mr, Mrs, Miss, Ms, Sir, Dame, Dr, Cllr, Lady or Lord, or titles or positions that can appear as a form of address without the person's name, as in Mr President, General, Captain, Father, Doctor or Earl (Honorific, 2023). Honorific endings attached to names are not found in the English language.

The use of honorary titles in the Burmese language can also be found but they are not as much as in the English language. This case can be discussed diachronically as there are only a few honorary titles are there in the Burmese language. In the past at the time of the monarchy, the honorifics were used for the nobility, clergy, officers, and royalties. Nowadays, honorifics are only used for the clergy, teachers, and medical doctors. But there are three honorary titles used with a person name for the male in terms of ages, e.g., Mg (young boys), Ko (middle-aged males), and U (aged males). For the female, there are only two honorary titles such as Ma (young and middle-aged females), and Daw (aged females). Sometimes, in the case of the government staff, how matter the age, the honorifics of "U" and "Daw" are used. Unlike in the English language, honorific endings attaching to names are found in the Burmese language but only in the clergy such as Sitagu Sayadaw (in which Sitagu is the name and Sayadaw is the honorific ending).

Table 3*English and Burmese Languages from the Point of Respect Grammatical Feature*

Types of Respect grammatical feature			English language	Burmese language
Referent	Titles	Honorary titles		
		Honorific endings		
	Polite pronouns	Special pronominal forms		
		Pronoun substitution (plural for the singular)		
		Pronoun avoidance		
		Substitution of title, kin term, etc. for pronoun		
	Nominal honorifics			
	Verbal honorifics	Verbal affixes		
		Suppletive verbal honorific forms		
		Honorified nominalizations		
		Honorified predicate adjectives		
Addressee	Special words of address			
	Special particles			
	Special verbal endings			
Avoidance language				

In terms of polite pronouns, the English language has only “substitution of title for the pronoun” especially in the formal situation. In the British parliament, the lawmakers use the term “Mr.Speaker” instead of “you”. However, Culpeper (2005) pointed out that using the title to familiar people is assumed to the impolite ones. In the Burmese language, pronoun substitution (e.g. plural for the singular) can be found in formal situations such as in paying obeisance ceremony in which “min tot/min:tou/ (plural pronoun)” is used instead of “min/min:/ (singular pronoun). The case of pronoun avoidance is presented in the section of “pronoun”.

In line with the English language, the substitution of title pronoun can be seen in formal situations like the graduation ceremony. Regarding nominal honorifics and verbal honorifics, both languages absent this feature. In the English language, Kibort and Greville (2008) mentioned that it has “special word of address” such as “sir and ma'am”. The Burmese language also has the same feature for example “Eaetaltawgyi/edhetokji:/ (Valuable guest)” and “Lugyimin/lukji:min:/(Sir or ma'am).

Avoidance language which is used instead of “taboo” or when speaking to the superior is obviously innated in both languages though it is not widely discussed here.

Figure 1

Grammatical Features of (Im)Politeness Found in the Two Languages

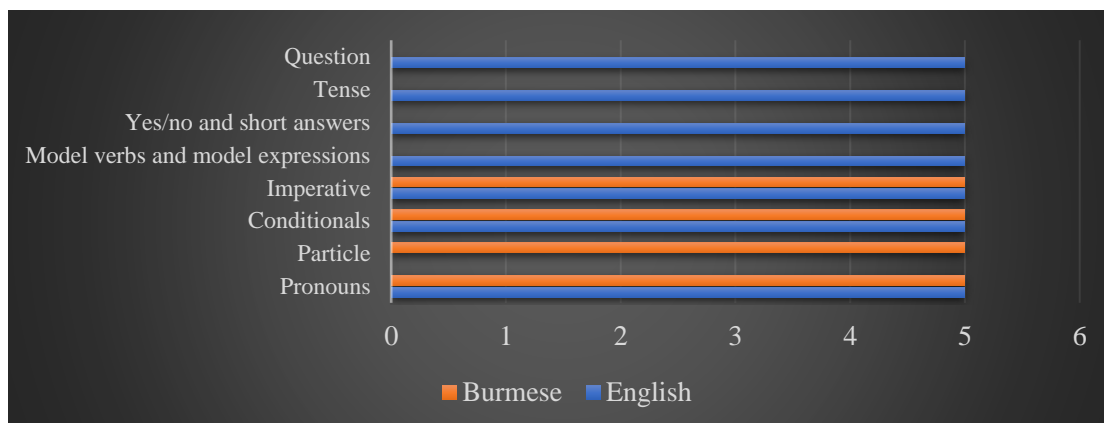


Figure 1 compares the grammatical features related to (im)politeness in the two languages. Here, 8 grammatical features are investigated in total and the English language concerns with 7 features except from “particle”. The Burmese language is only connected with 4 features and this does not mean that the Burmese language does not have not many grammatical features related to (im)politeness and it is due to the lack of grammar descriptions explained along with the usages and different varieties of grammatical books.

Table 4

Investigated Grammatical Features of (Im)politeness in the Inventory of Kibort and Greville (2008)

Kibort and Greville's (2008) Grammatical features relating to (im)politeness	Kibort and Greville's (2008) Grammatical features not relating to (im)politeness	Investigated grammatical features of (im)politeness not fit into the inventory of Kibort and Greville (2008)
1. Person (Pronouns)	1. Inflectional class	1. Conditionals
2. Respect	2. Stem index	2. Imperative
3. Tense (Tense)	3. Syncretic index	3. Yes/no and short answers
4. Aspect (Particle)	4. Morphological specification	4. Question
5. Mood (Model verbs and model expressions)	5. Gender	
	6. Number	
	7. Case	
	8. Definiteness	

Table 4 (*Continued*)

Kibort and Greville's (2008) Grammatical features relating to (im)politeness	Kibort and Greville's (2008) Grammatical features not relating to (im)politeness	Investigated grammatical features of (im)politeness not fit into the inventory of Kibort and Greville (2008)
	9. Polarity 10. Transitivity 11. Diathesis & voice 12. Evidentiality 13. Screeve 14. Associativity 15. Question word dependency	

Table 4 is mainly about the investigated grammatical features of (im)politeness that are not fit into the categories of Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory. Among 20 grammatical features of the inventory, only 5 (Person, Respect, Tense, Aspect, and Mood) are related to (im)politeness. There are four grammatical features of (im)politeness (Conditionals, Imperative, Yes/no and short answers, and Question) that cannot be put into any of the categories of the inventory. Table 3 answered the third objective of the present research which is inspired by Culpeper (n.d.). He stated that the insultives, a part of the impoliteness, are often linked with the possessive second-person singular pronoun of "your".

Though it is mentioned that the context is excluded in learning the linguistic features which are innately (im)polite, some data collected for the English language mentioned that they are (im)polite depending on certain situations like Requests, suggestions, and questions, Giving Opinions, giving feedback, asking for help and discussing Problems: Saying No!. In discussing the linguistic features without the context from the point of (im)politeness, there would be a few linguistic features that can exactly be recognized as the innate property of (im)politeness.

From the structural point of view, it's typical to deal with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation in many aspects (usage, politeness, etc.) when learning a language. This paper only deals with the grammatical aspects of impoliteness. On the other hand, there are still many areas of the language such as vocabulary relating to (im)politeness.

In the English language, certain verbs (e.g. reckon, guess, feel, seem, appear,...), tentative language (e.g. I'm not sure,...), vague expressions (e.g. around, about,...) and hedges (e.g. 'sort of', 'kind of', 'a little bit',...) can lessen the directness of the proposition. In addition, polite phrases showing respect to the hearer such as "Ladies and gentlemen" and "Excuse me" and polite addressing to the people (e.g. Madam, Sir, Regarding the pronunciation, the correct tone is important to sound the statements politely not only in English language but also in Burmese (Myanmar) language.

There are two major limitations in this study that could be addressed in future research. First, the politeness research studies themselves are the obvious limitation since the presence of innately (im)polite utterances and sentences are denied by most of the politeness scholars like Mills (2003) and Kecskes (2014). This kind of research can be assumed as the ground breaking paper in studying politeness from the neglected perspective. Second, the availability of data is another limitation as the comprehensive description of a grammatical feature on (im)politeness is rare and there are few researches on this aspect. Despite the limitations of this study, nine grammatical features of (im)politeness are revealed based on the data from two languages, and five of them are theoretically reinforced by Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory.

Recommendation

The present paper is about the (im)politeness of grammar from the point of view of the two languages (English and Myanmar). Kibort and Greville's (2008) inventory of grammatical features is used to uncover the grammatical descriptions related to (im)politeness. It is strongly hoped that the findings in this research definitely contribute to the field of (im)politeness since there are a few previous research papers and no books specifically written for "(Im)politeness in Grammar". This will be a fresh and innovative page on the prolonged study of (im)politeness since the current research wave on politeness denies the inborn essence of (im)politeness in utterances and sentences. The compilation of grammatical descriptions of (im)politeness in the English language is based on the existing grammar books. For the Burmese (Myanmar) language, these grammatical descriptions of (im)politeness would be new for its people since there is no grammar book on colloquial Burmese (Myanmar) and the existing grammar books ignore the role of usages, to my knowledge. In addition, the comparative results of these descriptions will shed light on the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural features of the two languages. This paper is expected to ignite a new study area of (im)politeness from the grammatical side and attract the interests and criticisms of the scholars working on (im)politeness. Moreover, this paper is to be a significant contribution towards teaching linguistic politeness and intercultural awareness by offering practical information to teachers on how differences in linguistic politeness among the two languages and increase students' intercultural awareness in their English language learning and teaching. Though English language teaching in Myanmar thrives employing modern approaches, grammar translation method is still widely practising. Further studies should be carried out with a more comprehensive grammatical inventory and more languages in order to present the role of grammar in the study of (im)politeness.

References

- Brown, P., & Levinson, C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cantrell, M. A. (2011). Demystifying the research process: Understanding a descriptive comparative research design. *Pediatric Nursing*, 37(4), (pg. 188+). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A265869622/AONE?u=googlescholar&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=fdeab004>

- Culpeper, J. (2005). Impoliteness and entertainment in the television quiz show: The weakest link. *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture*, 1, 35-72.
- Culpeper, J. (n.d.). *The grammar of impoliteness*. <https://societaslinguistica.eu/sle2023/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2022/12/The-Grammar-of-Impoliteness-final.pdf>
- Eastwood, J. (2002). Oxford guide to English grammar. Oxford University Press.
- Gartner, U. (2005). Is the Myanmar language really tenseless?. In J. Watkins (Ed.), *Studies in Burmese linguistics* (pp. 119). Pacific Linguistics.
- Grammatical Features Inventory*. (2023, March 18). University of Surrey. <https://www.smg.surrey.ac.uk/features/>
- Honorific*. (2023, March 23). *Oxford Living Dictionary*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/honorific>
- Johannes, H. (2013). Politeness distinctions in pronouns. In: Dryer, Matthew S. & Haspelmath, Martin (eds.) *WALS Online* (v2020.3) [Data set]. Zenodo. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7385533> (Available online at <http://wals.info/chapter/45>, Accessed on 2023-03-15.)
- Kecskés, I. (2014). *Intercultural pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Kibort, A., & Greville G. C. (2008). *Grammatical features inventory*. University of Surrey. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15126/SMG.18/1>
- Lodaira, S. (2021, September 10). *How to be polite in English*. British Council India. <https://www.britishcouncil.in/blog/how-be-polite-english>
- Masterclass: Being polite: How to soften your English*. (2023, March 17). BBC. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/course/towards-advanced/unit-24/tab/grammar>
- Mills, S. (2003). *Gender and politeness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mills, S. (2005). *Gender and impoliteness*. Cambridge University Press.
- Myanmar dictionary summary (Vol.3, Pa-ya)*. (1979). Myanmar Language Commission.
- Myanmar grammar* (2nd ed.). (2013). Department of Myanmar Language Commission.
- Myanmar-English dictionary*. (1996). Myanmar Language Commission.
- Okell, J. (1969). *A reference grammar of colloquial Burmese (two volumes)*. Oxford University Press.
- Olmen, D. V. (2018). Reproachatives and imperatives. *Linguistics*, 56, 115-162.
- Pan, Y. (2011). Methodological issues in East Asian politeness research. In D.Z. Kadar & S. Mills (Eds.), *Politeness in East Asian* (pp.71-97). Cambridge University Research.
- Panther, K. U., Thornburg, L. L., & Barcelona, A. (Eds.). (2009). *Metonymy and metaphor in grammar*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Podesva, R. J., & Sharma, D. (Eds.). (2013). *Research methods in Linguistics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Politeness*. (2023, March 17). Cambridge dictionary. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/politeness_2

- Terkourafi, M. (2005). Pragmatic correlates of frequency of use: The case for a notion of “mini-mal context”. In S. M. K. Nikiforidou & E. Antonopoulou (Eds.), *Reviewing Linguistic Thought: Converging Trends for the 21st Century* (pp. 209-233). De Gruyter.
- Tun, S. S. H. (2005). Discourse particles in Burmese. In J. Watkins (Ed.), *Studies in Burmese linguistics* (pp. 194). Pacific Linguistics.
- Vittrant, A. (2005). Burmese as a modality-prominent language. In J. Watkins (Ed.), *Studies in Burmese linguistics* (pp. 147). Pacific Linguistics.
- Watkins, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Studies in Burmese linguistics*. Pacific Linguistics.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.

Authors

Wai Yan Min Oo is an Assistant Lecturer in the Department of English at the Mandalay University of Foreign Languages at Myanmar. His main research interests include (im)politeness, intercultural communication, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. He has published a number of articles in major journals published by universities of Myanmar, proceedings of international conferences, and international peer-reviewed journals. Currently, he is doing PhD in Linguistic Sciences/Intercultural Linguistics at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University at Hungary with a focus on (im)politeness in intercultural communication.

Dr. Vaskó Ildikó is an Associate Professor with Habilitation and head of the department of Scandinavian Studies at ELTE Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary.