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# Intercultural Aspects of New Russian Politeness

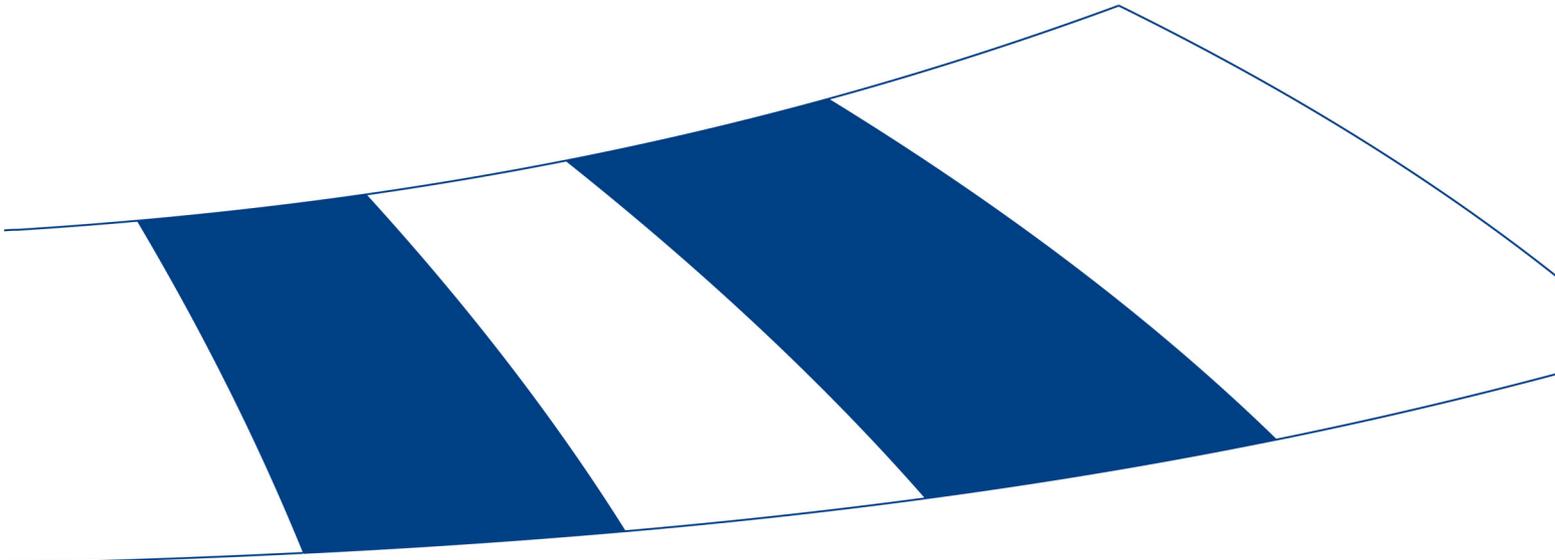


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# Abstract

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## Intercultural aspects of new Russian politeness

This paper is dedicated to surveying the present situation and the spread of the new Russian politeness phenomenon (NRP), and its evaluation and assessment by Russian native speakers in respect to the intercultural aspects of new Russian politeness. In terms of pragmatic change, the question is whether NRP is a short-lived linguistic fad or whether it is a thorough change in Russian pragmatic behaviour we are dealing with. The following paper is intended to show some empirical results of this survey of observations and responses relating to the spread and acceptance of politeness phenomena. Furthermore, the focus is on emotional evaluation, rational interpretation, and the spread of these phenomena into non-commercial communication domains. The informants' assessments prove remarkably heterogeneous and offer a variety of reactions, ranging from rejection and pejorative evaluation as communicative ballast to enthusiastic acceptance. The rational evaluations can be subsumed under westernisation and commercialisation of discourse – two aspects of globalisation which is seen as the implementation of forms of the free market economy. On the other hand, we also find a semantic interpretation as an expression of individualisation of discourse. It can finally be observed that while some respondents even diagnosed a decrease in politeness since its climax in the late 1990s, a possible mixture of genuinely Russian politeness (characterised by warmth, openness, spontaneity, taking an interest in others, etc.; positive politeness, Brown & Levinson 1987) with Western non-intrusive politeness (negative politeness, Brown & Levinson 1987) was also predicted, which I regard as the most optimistic future scenario.

## Keywords

Politeness; Intercultural communication; Russian pragmatics; Pragmatic change; Russian language

## Introduction

It is well known that in intercultural communication grammar or lexical mistakes in general have less negative consequences than the lack of politeness. The tolerance to mistakes normally leads to automatic correction, which, in fact, mostly – specially, in stereotyped situations – but not ever brings the intended result. When an Austrian student came to Russian friends and congratulated the host's wife with the words: *I complain you for the festive season*, nobody even reacted and the whole company understood that she wanted to say: *Best wishes for...* Even foreigners have to behave in a polite way, but they are allowed to make mistakes in lexis and grammar. Furthermore, in interviews with Austrian and Russian businessmen it was pointed out that Austrian businessmen suffer from the lack of politeness expressed by the Russian partners and the Russian often interpreted the 'normal' Austrian politeness as a demonstration of insincerity. In Soviet times, going shopping was rather disappointing for foreigners, not only because of the deficit of goods, but also because of the rudeness of shop assistants. These few examples show why questions of politeness are of great importance in intercultural communication. In this paper we will focus on pragmatic changes in Russian communication, especially concerning politeness, which will affect intercultural communication with Russians too.

In the twenty years since Perestroika began, which was initiated by Michail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, the market economy has been firmly established in Russia, a circumstance which is also reflected in various linguistic phenomena. In large Russian cities, since the beginning of the 1990s, changes in pragmatic behaviour have been observed, apart from an increase in general anglicisms, and in anglicised economic technical terms. These pragmatic changes relate to forms of address which have changed owing to the

pervasive loss of the universal 'comrade', and the decreased use of patronyms (Krongauz 2004, Formanovskaia 2004). Another sphere of pragmatic change is verbal interaction in service encounters. Especially in upmarket luxury shops and foreign chain stores (though not exclusively in these), shop assistants are required to be polite towards customers, and they do show the politeness requested. The politeness strategies exhibited are in stark contrast to those customary in Soviet times. In the public sphere, moreover, signs and labels can be seen which contain apologies and pleas for understanding in cases of inconvenience, which is also quite a novelty. This change in 'public phenomena of politeness' I would like to call 'New Russian Politeness' (from now on referred to as NRP).

The rise of NRP can be modelled through an evident hypothesis for its development: The entry of Western firms into the Russian market since the early 1990s has been accompanied by opening branches, subsidiaries or agencies. While the majority of employees came from the Russian population, the high-ranking managers were from the European or American headquarters, and thus imported the leadership and communication styles they were used to. Being the Russians' bosses, they were in a position to introduce their style into the local operations, and they were able to demand it from their employees. Further aspects were the increased numbers of Western and American tourists and business people in Russia, and of Russians in the West respectively. This contact with manners which are customary in the Western and American service sector affected expectations back home in Russia. When Western tourists to Russia and business people criticised unfriendly manners, this had a similar effect. Finally, even the Russian president Putin played a certain role in this, as he behaves more 'westernly' than his predecessor Yeltsin, and thus serves as a good example to his compatriots. It remains questionable, however, how far beyond the economic situation NRP is effective, and in which way genuinely Russian politeness with its dominating positive politeness, its concern about fellow human beings, and the proverbial Russian directness will continue to be effective. This paper is dedicated to surveying the present situation and the spread of the NRP phenomenon, and its evaluation and assessment by Russian native speakers. In terms of pragmatic change, the question is whether NRP is a short-lived linguistic fad or whether it is a thorough change in Russian pragmatic behaviour we are dealing with. The following paper is intended to show some empirical results of this survey of observations and responses relating to the spread and acceptance of politeness phenomena. Furthermore, the focus is on emotional evaluation, rational interpretation, and the spread of these phenomena into non-commercial communication domains.

A few comments on the analytical methods employed seem to be in order here: Linguistic pragmatics, leaning on ethnological practice, employs several methods of data elicitation, and a combination of various methods, whose application cyclically leads to constantly modified hypothesis-building and further empirical testing until a certain redundancy of results is achieved. (cf. Davis & Henze 1998, 404, in particular). That is why the research design comprises the following steps:

- Direct observation: Gathering data in academies, in shops, hotels, in the streets, with friends etc. in Moscow and other cities of the Russian Federation since the beginning of the 1990s.
- Interviews: 17 interviews were conducted in February 2006 in order to elicit observations, evaluations, and assessments of NRP from informants from Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Voronezh, Volgograd and Saratov. 14 of the interviewees were trained linguists, which warrants a high degree of linguistic awareness. The qualitative guided interviews were analysed according to how they dealt with the central questions which were subsumed in thematic clusters. The most relevant statements, and those made most vehemently, were then integrated into a questionnaire (for details see Rathmayr 2008).
- Questionnaires: The questionnaires were completed by 299 people (most of them resident in Moscow) between December 2006 and February 2007.

The age distribution among the respondents is a bit unbalanced for practical reasons: 6 up to 15 years (which amounts to 2%), 163 were between 16-25 years old (55%), 22 between 26-35 (7%), 47 between 36-50 (which makes up 16%), 60 older than 50 (20%) but this proved hardly relevant for the final results. 30% of informants were male, 70% female.

## Manifestations of New Russian Politeness

NRP comprises formulae like *Can I help you?*, *Thank you for shopping with us, come visit us again*. The legendary rudeness of service staff in Soviet-era shops is still remembered by many, and still to be found in

some places, which is why offers to help and thanks for shopping constitute a pragmatic innovation in the shops of Russian cities and towns. Earlier attempts to change staff's behaviour have been made<sup>1</sup>, but they have remained futile and without effect. At the end of 2006, beginning of 2007, 70% of the informants asked did diagnose increased polite behaviour among shop assistants, and in boutiques and upmarket shops this observation was made by even 78%. This pragmatic change is not restricted to Moscow and St. Petersburg, but was confirmed by interview partners from all large cities.<sup>2</sup> Most informants also agreed that this behaviour is tied to professional roles and needs to be acquired because shop assistants are threatened with sanctions such as salary cuts or even dismissals if they do not show this behaviour. An interviewee from Voronezh pointed out that in his town two shops had to close because the shop assistants refused or were unable to comply with these new rules.

This increase in politeness in the privatised business domain clearly confirms Leech's (1977) approach to describing the required level of politeness strategies. Along with the changing cost-benefit relation, the nature of politeness strategies has changed as well: In Soviet times customers had to cajole shop assistants, who were the masters over the scarce goods available, into parting with some of the desired merchandise. In view of the surplus of goods in the market economy now, customers have the option to satisfy their demands elsewhere as well, and thus it is now the shop assistants who have to make use of politeness strategies. This request for adhering to a corporate etiquette for verbal and non-verbal behaviour can be dealt with in the context of changing 'politic behaviour' (to use a term by Watts 2003).

In some other fields of public communication, further changes towards more politeness have been observed. The responses to phone calls in public institutions and shops have changed, for instance, and 68% of the respondents observed more polite forms used in greetings, when introducing oneself, in offers to help/when offering their help, while only 16% did not notice anything of the kind. The situation is different in the field of public transport, for which 67% of the respondents observed no changes whatsoever.

## Emotional Evaluation

For Western visitors it is extremely pleasant not to be ignored or shouted at anymore by Russian shop assistants. Among the Russian native interviewees, however, there was no consensus as to whether NRP was seen as something positive or not. Some interviewees pointed out that NRP appeared to them in direct opposition to genuinely Russian spontaneity, honesty and directness; it seemed to be a waste of time, and not at all necessary: *Some people think that this is redundant politeness, which is not even very appropriate, because 'We are sorry, we are having a break', is not what we need in such a situation, no need to be so polite. Simply '(there is a) break', everyone will understand this. This is simply a tendency towards simplicity in Russian communicative awareness.*

The questionnaire survey, by contrast, shows a clearly positive evaluation of NRP: 90% of the respondents found NRP pleasant, 46% explicitly saw no insincerity in this, and 95% are against calling NRP a waste of time. Critical voices are thus clearly in the minority. This result is also supported by the question on whether the formerly customary impoliteness would be considered shocking today. 65% of the respondents confirmed that impolite shop assistants would be an unpleasant surprise for them, while only 22%, among whom 62% (41) female and 38% (25) male informants suffer no such shock. Concerning the general proportion (30% male, 70% female informants) one can gather that, contrary to my expectations, male informants do not react less sensitively to impoliteness than female informants. As 55% of the respondents belonged within the category of 16-25 year-olds, the results clearly show something of a generational shift. Especially the young generation obviously appreciates NRP and has no problem with rival categories like dishonesty or waste of time.

## Rational Interpretation

The interview interpretations of the NRP phenomenon can be summarised in the following three groups: ethnolinguistic, socio-economic, and semantic interpretations.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g. the recommendation to use the formulaic request *What would you like, please?* (Pozhaluista, chto Vam ugodno?), which was already made in an etiquette manual at the end of the Khrushchev era (Strogov 1962, quoted in Kelly 2001).

<sup>2</sup> It is to be emphasised that the survey focuses on large Russian cities. The situation in the Russian provinces may be completely different.

- Among the ethnolinguistic interpretations we can count the repeatedly voiced opinion that NRP is seen as a Western influence on the Russian language and culture: *a habit coming from the West, which we have inherited from the West*. The linguistic formulae are considered calques from English, but the only aspect that is really seen as something negative is the contradiction between Western politeness and genuinely Russian openness. This interpretation does not find much support in the questionnaires: Only 13% of the respondents see NRP in the service sector as a Western influence that is in opposition to the Russian mentality and communication culture, whereas 78% explicitly disagree with this opinion. NRP as dishonesty is only diagnosed by roughly a third of the respondents, 31%, (61 female, 35 male informants).
- The socio-economic interpretations are reflected in statements like the following: *This is a certain communicative situation with a given distribution of roles: if the shop assistant has to serve the customer, then this means he/she has to behave in a certain way, also verbally: the more a customer buys, the more polite one has to be*. An overwhelming majority of questionnaire respondents identified with the market-economy origin of NRP – 92%. Only 3%, that is 10 people (of whom 7 female, 3 male), do not agree with this hypothesis. It is remarkable that a high identification with the market-economy origin of NRP apparently totally ignores the Western origin of the market economy. From a Western European perspective, the rational evaluations can be subsumed under westernisation and commercialisation of discourse – two aspects of globalisation, which is seen as the implementation of forms of the free market economy. The quantitative data has thus confirmed my initial hypothesis about the origin of NRP convincingly.
- The semantic approach to NRP as an expression of the individualisation of public life, in which the individual is finally given recognition, is represented by several interviewees, especially by those who had previous experience with Western European countries, e.g.: *This is just a general orientation .... towards a more personal approach, that is, communication in the city is getting less anonymous, there is a more personal, more individual orientation*. This interpretation corresponds to an approach in politeness theory according to which politeness is meant to maintain social harmony between the conversation partners (Leech 1983, 104), and to make them feel at ease (Make A feel good!; R. Lakoff 1973). The results of the questionnaire are very ambivalent in this respect: 44% in favour of this interpretation versus 45% rejecting it. Only the socio-economic interpretation is thus unequivocally confirmed.

## Outlook

In the Western European market economy societies 'commercial' politeness is not limited to service encounters but a general principle of communication, even if it is not always observed. It is too early to say how far this also applies to Russian society. Given today's observations, only a rudimentary development of NRP can be diagnosed, and it can only be speculated as to how likely such a pervasive change is.

In the interviews, we asked about phenomena of increased politeness that could already be observed outside service encounters. These changes were indeed observed by some of the interviewees: *All in all, you can say that awareness of linguistic etiquette and politeness has become much greater than before Perestroika; Politeness exists in the service sector, and from there it is spreading into other spheres of everyday life*. In this context they refer to a general Europeanization (*evropeiskii shleif*) of everyday behaviour, e.g. to the greater care that is given to the appearance of house entrances (they are getting tidier and brighter, and sometimes even flowers are planted (*sazhaiut tsvety*) or the decreasing numbers of drunk people in Moscow's streets. In some interviews, this change in society in general was linked to the orientation towards achievement and career which is typical of 'modern' society, and politeness seems as an indispensable attribute of a successful career: *Getting ahead is something very positive and it is clear that the mechanism of career-making implies that you always come across as successful, and that you do not try to delegate your problems to others. I therefore believe in view of this general ideology of success and so on, that impolite aggressive behaviour does not appear successful*.

The quantitative part of my survey shows quite well that this process has only just begun: Only 29% of the respondents observed linguistic changes towards more verbal politeness among neighbours, while 46% did not notice such a change. At work, 40% experienced more politeness; slightly less, 31%, more politeness among strangers in the streets, whereas 51% think that nothing has changed. Still, 64% of the respondents are convinced that NRP will continue, and only 19% do not agree with this optimistic perspective.

Overall, it can be observed that while some respondents even diagnosed a decrease in politeness since its climax in the late 1990s, a possible mixture of genuinely Russian politeness (characterised by warmth, openness, spontaneity, taking an interest in others, etc.; positive politeness, according to Brown & Levinson 1987) with Western non-intrusive politeness (negative politeness, Brown & Levinson 1987) was also predicted, which I regard as the most optimistic future scenario: *On the one hand you talk warm-heartedly with the shop assistant, on the other she communicates with you politely and does not try anymore to force anything upon you.* This observation was not made *in boutiques or especially elegant places* but in rather ordinary shops: *There are shop assistants who, especially when you buy at their shops more often, are able to link this attitude of 'the customer who is always right, to whom you have to be polite, have to say thank you to', with this element of non-intrusive and discreet advice.*

## Conclusion

In this paper it has been argued, based on an empirical study carried out with inhabitants of several large Russian cities, that political and economic changes in Russia have brought about a change in 'public phenomena of politeness' in service encounters, referred to as 'New Russian Politeness'. Calques from English-speaking countries are linguistically particularly striking. Unlike in Soviet times, politeness strategies in service encounters are no longer initiated by the customers but by the shop assistants, which reflects a reversal of interests induced by the transition from the Soviet economy of scarcity to a free-market abundance of goods (cf. the social politeness parameters in Leech 1977). Shop assistants are requested to use politeness strategies, and threatened with sanctions such as salary cuts or even dismissals if they do not use them.

Foreign visitors to Russia unanimously appreciate this development. The Russian informants' assessments prove remarkably heterogeneous and offer a variety of reactions, ranging from the rejection and pejorative evaluation of NRP as communicative ballast to its enthusiastic acceptance. The rational evaluations can be subsumed under Westernisation and commercialisation of discourse. The majority of informants, however, only see the influence of the economic structure but not of the West as such. It can finally be observed that clearly more than half of the informants (64%) are convinced that this politeness will continue to be on the rise. This optimistic outlook to the future is backed up by the evaluation of NRP as something pleasant (by 90% of all respondents), and allows for a cautious interpretation of NRP as an evolving far-reaching pragmatic change—despite the fact that NP has only started to spread to communication spheres other than the commercial and public ones.

The first wave of Europeanising manners in Russia was clearly initiated by political rulers. In the early 18th century, Peter I introduced French court etiquette, had manuals on how to strike the right tone translated (for instance, Zhizn' v svete ... 1890, 'Life in society, at home, and at court') and demanded the use of Western European politeness far beyond the Tsarist court. The political influence brought about by the Revolution of 1917 was the abolition of 'bourgeois' (politeness) manners and language use (Comrie & Stone 1978, 172-199).

Since the market economy was implemented in 1985, it has not only been purely economic laws, but also new manners between their major agents, shop assistants and customers, that have been introduced. These rules are slowly but surely spreading into other domains as well. The current attempt at Europeanising manners and politeness is thus primarily prompted by the economy, and not by politics. In view of the varied and heterogeneous development of NRP, the described changes in the intercultural contact with Russian communication partners require not only intercultural awareness but also diversity awareness in Charles' (2007) sense.

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