

(Im)politeness and the study of literature: Ian McEwan's style in fiction

Urszula Kizelbach (Adam Mickiewicz University)

In their seminal publication *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987) Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson proposed a strategy-based view of human communication, noting that there is a universal set of preferred types of linguistic behaviour (or strategies) which help interactants achieve their conversational goals and maintain social harmony. However, their “norm-based” view had its critics. The fact is that the Brown and Levinson politeness framework assumes that politeness is largely communicated through traditional polite linguistic forms and strategies, attributing a given linguistic form a fixed grammatical meaning, as in the case of speech acts. The critique is provided by Sperber and Wilson's ([1995] 2006) Relevance Theory which sees human communication from a wider perspective, as a result of the individual's cognitive processes rather than a reliance on set linguistic phrases reserved for specific situations. Still, Brown and Levinson's findings have been used in other approaches (Culpeper 2010) and they have been successfully combined with other research fields, such as stylistics and narratology (Fludernik 2009). The aim of this talk is to show the potential of (im)politeness both as a linguistic theory and as a powerful methodological tool for analysing fictional dialogue. Based on the example of Ian McEwan's novel *Nutshell*, I will demonstrate how (im)politeness serves not only as a means of characterisation in fiction (intradiegetic level) but also how it can describe the communication between the implied author and reader (extradiegetic level).

Keywords: Politeness, Impoliteness, Narratology, Literary characterisation, Extradiegetic communication

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