
UNIT 17 DOING THINGS WITH LANGUAGE: POLITENESS

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will learn-

- Use of polite forms of English language
- and their use in communicative situations.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

If you take care of the grammar of a foreign/second language, you will learn to speak and write the language *correctly*. In the previous units, we emphasized the fact that a language also had to be used *appropriately*. Let us take a formal business situation to illustrate our point. You wish to thank the manager of the bank who provided you with necessary finance to help you buy a new machine for your factory. How should you express your thanks? Will you begin your letter as follows:

(1) Thanks a lot. I don't know what I'd have done without the loan from the bank. or as follows:

(2) Many thanks for providing us with the loan for our new machine.

or as follows:

(3) It was very good of you to provide us with a loan for our new machine.
Thank you indeed.

or as follows:

(4) I want to thank you very much for the loan you have provided us for our new machine.

or as follows:

(5) I write to thank you for giving us the loan for our new

machine. or as follows:

(6) We would like to thank you for providing us with the loan for our new machine.

In examples 1 to 6 you have not faced any grammatical problem: the sentences are all grammatically correct. You are faced with the question of appropriateness: which of the six forms is the most appropriate for the expression of thanks in the given situation? As you know that for using English appropriately we had to pay attention to such considerations as formal and informal language and spoken and written forms. If we look at sentences 1 to 6 from these considerations, we may say that 1 is inappropriate because an expression like 'thanks a lot' is informal and does not belong in a formal letter. But what about sentences 2 to 6? You can see that the distinction between formal and informal English alone does not help you to determine the most appropriate form in this communicative situation. Nor is the distinction between spoken and written forms sufficiently helpful.

We need to pay attention to yet another aspect of language in use: politeness. When we do such things in English as, for example, making requests, offers and invitations, or thanking someone for something, we do them politely. It is socially correct to be polite. Now, tentative modals such as 'could' and 'would' are markers of politeness in many situations in English, if we return to sentences 2 to 6, we can say that sentence 6 carries a politeness signal. It is also in order to print out that the pronoun used in 6 is 'we' instead of 'I' because 'we' is a 'formal' version of 'I'. If we now return to the situation of the letter referred to above, the writer of it is expected to say things formally and politely because the situation under consideration is formal and the function such as giving thanks to someone calls for politeness. Therefore sentence 6 is the most appropriate form in which you can express your thanks in the situation of the letter under consideration.

The discussion above is not intended to suggest that there is only one form that is sentence 6, in which we can express our thanks to the manager. What is emphasized is this: language in a formal situation and for a function calling for politeness should be both formal and polite. To be formal means to avoid informal expressions and to be polite in this context means not to miss out linguistic signals of politeness socially expected of you. So long as these considerations are observed, there can be variations on 6 by varying the degrees of politeness and formality. Therefore, instead of 6 you could also say:

(7) Please accept our grateful thanks for providing us with the loan for our new machine.

(8) We would like to express our gratitude for providing us with the loan for our new machine.

(9) The management would like to express its gratitude to you for providing it with the loan for a new machine.

If you did not wish to sound very formal, you could use language that was less formal but would still mark the function with politeness (for example by using the word 'grateful'):

(10) I am writing to say how grateful we are to you for giving us the loan for our new machine.

In this unit we focus on politeness as an important requirement for using language appropriately.

17.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF POLITENESS

It would seem that the principle of politeness revolves around three considerations:

- (i) Don't impose on your hearer.
- (ii) Give your hearer options.
- (iii) Make your hearer feel good (that is, be friendly).

We will discuss each briefly and illustrate it with examples.

17.2.1 Don't Impose on Your Hearer

The first consideration has to do with minding one's own business. So, we are not expected to intrude on our hearer's privacy. If we have to, we ask for his permission, as it were, while doing so politeness is called for. In other words, requests for information about one's 'private matters' are signaled by the question form directed at asking for the hearer's permission:

- (11) *May I ask* what this cricket bat cost you?
- (12) What did you pay for it, *if I may ask*?

No politeness marking in this form is required if the information asked for relates to matters that are not private to the hearer:

- (13) May I ask where Mool Chand hospital is?

The intended request in 13 can however be put across politely in other ways. For example:

- (14) Can you tell me where Mool Chand Hospital is?
- (15) Would you mind telling me where Mool Chand hospital is?

Money matters and family affairs, for example, are treated as private by members of British society. If we do such a thing with language as asking someone for information in these matters, we signal politeness by asking their permission:

- (16) May I ask what your eldest son is doing now?

Similarly, 'unmentionables' (e.g. defecation) or 'distressing facts' (e.g. sudden death) are put across politely. The strategy for politeness in these matters involves avoiding using the 'unmentionable' or 'unpleasant' word; it is tactful to use some technical/formal or euphemistic term:

- (17) The patient was delirious and passed water on his mattress. (cf. urinated)
- (18) The President was assassinated. (cf. murdered)
- (19) His father passed away yesterday. (cf. died)

17.2.2 Give Your Hearer Options

The second consideration, that is giving options to your hearer, is closely related to the first one of non-imposition. Giving options to the hearer involves making him feel that you are not imposing your will on him. The hearer is given the choice, as it were, to make his own decisions. Compare, for example, 20 with 21:

- (20) Lend me your bicycle.
(21) Can I borrow your bicycle?

In 21 the hearer has been given a fairly obvious option to decide whether to lend the bicycle or not. Not only is 21 polite but it is also appropriate; in doing such a thing as making a request with English, it is socially appropriate to be polite. The need to give options will also explain why such functions as making requests, offers, invitations and giving advice are put across in the question form or in the conditional form or with the help of non-committal words like 'wonder' and 'mind'. For example:

- (22) Can you wait for a moment?
(23) If you will wait for a moment.
(24) I wonder if you could wait for a moment.

To express a particular function indirectly is also to give options to your hearer: You let him, as it were, decide what inference to draw. And if you give options, you are polite. Therefore, the speakers of English can also take recourse to indirect expressions when they have to do things with language politely:

- (25) I was wondering if you could lend me your bicycle.

Consider 26 in which the speaker is so indirect that he hardly seems to refer to the intended communicative function:

- (26) It is very hot in this room.

Instead of saying directly 'Open the windows' or somewhat indirectly "Can you open the windows?", the boss, on the face of it, has made an observation on the state of the room in the example above in 26. The person in charge of cleaning and airing the rooms draws the conclusion that the windows should be opened: it is his conclusion as it were and not an order from the boss. In the context above, 26 is therefore, a very polite form of asking the employee to do what he forgot to do although it was his job to do it.

17.2.3 Make Your Hearer Feel Good

The third consideration involves establishing a proper relationship between the speaker and the hearer. For example, if they are equals, the hearer will reflect this relationship appropriately in doing things with language. If the speaker and the hearer are in a relationship of a superior to a subordinate, doing things appropriately with language will call for the use of right signals to reflect the relationship. If the speaker (Rakesh Verma), for example, is of a higher status to his hearer (Rohit Kumar), the use of familiar forms of address on his part will put the hearer at ease. But if the speaker's status is lower than that of his hearer, he must not use familiar forms; he will have to use forms which are deferential:

- (27) Rakesh: Rohit, have you drawn up the building plans?
Rohit: They are nearly ready, Mr. Verma. I'll place them before you within an hour.

To put forward the third consideration in being polite elaborately, we can say that doing things appropriately with language calls for a careful consideration of the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. How well does the speaker know the person he is talking to (a friend, a workmate or a complete stranger)? Is he talking to a person of an equal, superior or subordinate relationship? Is he talking to a person of a similar age or of a similar social background? It is out of these considerations that Rakesh uses the form of address 'Rohit' while Rohit calls him 'Mr. Verma'.

It is worth pointing out that this question of politeness is closely related to a particular culture and society. If we return to examples 11 and 12, it is not an imposition in Indian society to enquire about the cost of some item as it is in the middle strata of British society. Therefore, an Indian will have a very strong tendency to delete politeness forms from 11 and 12: he may opt for the following:

- (28) What did this cricket bat cost you?
(29) What did you pay for it?

Again, an Indian parent, for example, may find the following form odd or even strange when a middle-class British parent naturally opts for a polite form in asking her young child to do her a small favour:

- (30) John, would you mind turning on the TV?

The next section in this unit therefore focuses on the following question: What are the functions that call for politeness from British speakers of English?

17.3 COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS THAT CALL FOR POLITENESS

Speakers of English use polite forms in performing certain communicative functions. We shall take a close look at some of the functions that call for politeness.

Let us consider some examples of politeness in many different communicative situations. Consider the following extract from a conversation between father and son:

- (E1) Daddy pushed Wallace off and got up. They went downstairs and Wallace let Wussy the cat in.

'What do you want for breakfast, Wallace?' Daddy asked.

'Can I open Wussy's tin?' said Wallace.

'Yes,' I said. 'What do you want for breakfast?'

Wallace turned the handle of the tin-opener. 'Coms,' he said.

Daddy got him the Corn Flakes.

'Do you like yoghurt?' Daddy asked.

'Yes,' said Wallace.

'Yes, *please*,' said Daddy.

(Simon Watson: *The New Red Bike & Other Stories*)

Glossary

yoghurt (also spelt *yogurt*, *yoghourt*): It is made from milk by turning it thick. It is slightly sour in taste and is generally eaten with a meal of vegetables or meat.

In the excerpt above, what did Wallace's daddy do with the language? He wanted to offer his son some yoghurt. What did Wallace do with the language? He expressed interest in eating it; his language (bare 'yes') was however abrupt and therefore

Rhetorical Devices

lacked a certain politeness. His father pointed out to him the omission of 'please', a minimum politeness signal. It is interesting to note that in short answers to 'yes-no' questions (31 and 32) or to requests and offers made in the form of questions (33 and 34), and to statements (35), it is almost a matter of convention (except in familiar/casual speech) not to use a bare *Yes* or *No*: the subject and auxiliary verb of the question are often repeated, or words like *please*, *thanks*, *certainly* are added.

- (31) Are you coming?
Yes, I am.
- (32) Are you all right?
Yes, thanks.
- (33) Will you pass the plate, please?
Yes, certainly.
- (34) Would you like some yoghurt?
Yes, please.
- (35) He has left a message for
her. Yes, he has.

Do is used in answers to sentences with no auxiliary verb:

- (36) He enjoys playing
tennis. Yes, he does.

If you go over the replies in 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, and 36 by omitting the words after the Yes/No, you can hear their abruptness and therefore also the lack of politeness. However, notice the replies to an echo question (E2) and to a tag question asking for confirmation of the opinion given in the statement (E3):

- (E2) Lamb: ... Jackal is very kind, you know, Ox. He has a lot of shops to sell. But
this was his *best* one.
Ox: His *best* one?
Lamb: Yes.

(Ronald Mackin & Miles Lee: *Ox and Lamb Go to Live in the Town*)

- (E3) Lamb: Listen, Ox. *You* must earn some money. You're very strong. You can
pull carts.
Ox: Pull carts; I don't want to pull carts.
Lamb: You want to eat, don't you?
Ox: Yes.
(Ronald Mackin & Miles Lee: *Ox and Lamb Go to Live in the Town*)

In these contexts, the bare form 'Yes' is appropriate although it was hardly appropriate in 31 to 36.

When speakers of English make *requests and offers*, *give suggestions, advice and invitations*, *express desires*, *give uncertain opinions*, *make criticisms*, *accept or reject offers*, they perform these functions in polite language. We shall give here examples relating to such functions as expressing desires and giving uncertain opinions.

A 'desire' is a strong feeling that you want to do something or to get something; implicit in it is a strong sense of 'self'. English-speaking people consider it impolite to make a direct statement of desires like:

- (37) I want you to help her.
or
(38) I prefer to mend it myself.

To be polite, they would modify the forms in 37 and 38 as follows:

- (39) I should like you to help her.
- (41) I would prefer to mend it myself.

The use of *should/would* makes the statements sound less bold, more hesitant, and therefore more polite. In other words, the 'sense of self' in the desire is toned down as it were by *should/would*. It may be noted that in the first person *should* and *would* are both possible (with no real difference of meaning); in the second and third person *would* is used:

- (41) I should/would like to invite them all.
- (42) They would like to invite only a few.

We must remember that in casual, familiar speech features of politeness can be left out. In contexts where politeness is required, *I should/would like* is however more polite than *I want*. *I should/would* contracted to *I'd* is often more common in informal speech:

- (43) I'd like to meet your children.
- (44) I'd like to have a little rest this afternoon.
- (-45) I'd like you to meet my parents when you go to Calcutta.
- (46) I'd like to see your garden.
- (47) I'd like you to read my composition.

It may be worthwhile pointing out that 'like' in the context of a 'desire'/'wish' given above (that is, to ask for something, or to be allowed to do something) is different from 'like' meaning 'to be fond of':

- (48) I like mangoes.
- (49) I don't like big cities.

Notice that 'wish' also means 'want' and can be used to express what one may 'desire', but it is more formal than 'want'. The three examples given below would again point to the fact that for performing many different language functions language users have to pay attention to the appropriateness of language forms:

- (50) I wish to make a complaint. (formal)
- (51) I want to make a complaint. (neutral)
- (52) I'd like to make a complaint. (polite)

Now, let us consider such a function as giving slightly uncertain opinions, that is, when the speaker is not completely confident of his 'facts' or his 'opinion'. In the absence of facts or the inability to make up his mind, he should prefer, as it were, to put across his opinion hesitantly. And to be hesitant in such contexts is to be polite. The forms with conditional *should/would* are very common with the desire/opinion verbs such as 'like', 'think', 'say', 'argue' for signalling politeness. Consider the following:

- (53) I think she is about 30 years of age.
- (54) I should think she was about 30 years of age.

In 53, 'I think she is' would be much less uncertain than 'I should think she was.' Consider some more examples:

- (55) I would say that the building will be ready by the end of the year.
- (56) These examination results would seem to indicate a decline in standards.

Similarly, in the following extracts notice why the speakers say 'I should say net', and 'I should think'.

(E4) 'I'll be on my way. Hope your friend comes around all right. Going to call time on him sharp?'

'I should say not!' said the other. 'I'll give him half an hour at least. If Jimmy is alive on earth he'll be here by that time. So long, officer.'

(O. Henry: *After Twenty Years*)

Glossary

Going to call time on him sharp? : Will you only wait for him until the appointed time?

So long: goodbye

(E5) Suddenly, he broke off his singing and returned her stare.

'I take it, Madam,' he said, 'that you do not appreciate my singing.'

'I should think it's hardly the place,' she said shortly. 'That's all,' and turned her head away.

(Elizabeth Taylor: *The Fly-Paper*)

Again, the need to be polite in performing such functions as 'thanking somebody for help' or 'wishing somebody good luck', would require that 57 and 58

(57) I want to thank everyone who helped us.

(58) We wish you good luck.

should be in the form of 59 and 60:

(59) I would like to thank everyone who helped us.

(60) We'd like to wish you good luck.

It may be in order to consider briefly some of the language functions that are not expressed with particular markers of politeness. The point under consideration is that a marker of politeness used in doing such functions would be misplaced. Take for example the action of showing gratefulness on receiving a present. The marker of politeness for expressing gratefulness (i.e. 'grateful') is misplaced in 61 because English speakers do not expect a show of gratefulness for a present, but its expression is in order in 62:

*(61) I'm really grateful for that lovely present.

(62) I'm really grateful for your help.

Similarly, while we use 'please' in making requests and, on many occasions, in giving orders, we do not use it in giving permission. You can now see why 63 and 64 are in order and why 65, 66 and 67 are not:

(63) Please stand away from the door. (order)

(64) Could you stand away from the door, please? (request)

*(65) You may stand near the door, please. (permission)

*(66) You may give it to her, please.

*(67) Students may stay out only until 10 p.m., please.

Similarly, while invitations require a tentative 'would', information about one's customs/habits is obtained without tentative modals:

- (68) Would you like to meet a school friend of mine?
*(69) Would you like to have tea in bed every morning?

Therefore, 69 would become:

- (70) Do you like to have tea in bed every morning?

Check Your Progress 1

1. Change sentences 1 to 6 given below into polite forms according to the principle of politeness discussed in 34.2. There can be more than one polite form for each sentence. The first sentence has been done for you.

1. How much did these socks cost you?

Ans. May I ask you how much these socks cost you?

or

Do you mind if I ask you how much these socks cost you?

2. A has a headache and asks for help (i.e. makes a request): Give me an aspirin.

Ans. _____

3. A has a headache and B makes an offer of help (makes an offer): I will give you an aspirin.

Ans. _____

4. A's bicycle tyres have very little air. He wants to use B's bicycle pump (asks for permission):
Give me your bicycle pump.

Ans. _____

5. A is visiting B. B offers him some tea (makes an offer): Have some tea.

Ans. _____

6. A has to put some additional chairs in his classroom. He wants some from B's room (request for permission):
I will take 4 chairs from your room.

Ans. _____

2. Put a cross against the sentence in which a marker of politeness, such as 'please', 'grateful', 'would', is misplaced:

1 Would you like to have a bath every day?

2 May I come in, please?

3 Can you tell me his house number, please?

4 I'd like to know his address, please.

5 Will you please remember to post the letter?

6 I am grateful to you for these lovely presents.

7 I am grateful to you for what you have done for me.

8 You may come in, please.

17.4 STRATEGIES FOR POLITENESS

There would seem to be two main strategies for being polite while doing things with language: indirectness and tentativeness.

17.4.1 Indirectness

Indirectness, as the term implies, is a means of being less forceful and direct. Consider the following:

- (71) Your estimates of the repairs of the building are wrong.
 (72) I wonder if your estimates of the repairs of the building are quite right.

The difference between 71 and 72 is one of tact: the criticism in 71 is direct and in 72 indirect. What is the motivation to be indirect? Speakers tend to be indirect when there is a risk of causing offence or distress to someone. Therefore, in many situations an indirect expression like 72 may be more appropriate than 71. Besides trying to avoid offence, there may be many other reasons for being indirect. The reasons for indirectness would differ from one set of language functions to another.

Now, an extract from a story to illustrate indirectness. A recently released convict forces his entry into a bishop's house. 'the bishop tries to make him feel comfortable. He asks his old servant, Madame Magloire, to provide the guest with the necessary things. Notice how the bishop uses direct expressions in E6 and E7 and an indirect expression in E8 when he finally asks for more lights at the supper table:

- (E6) 'Can you give me something to eat, and a place to sleep? Have you a stable?'

'Madame Magloire,' said the bishop, 'put some sheets on the bed in the alcove.'

Glossary

alcove: a small partly enclosed space in a room.

They are about to sit down at supper. Madame Magloire brings in a plate and sets it on the table:

- (E7) 'Madame Magloire,' said the bishop 'put this plate as near the fire as you can.'

As she puts the plate on the table, the bishop feels that the lighting at the table is not sufficient. Notice how indirectly, almost in the form of a suggestion (*Zoe lamp gives a very poor light*), he asks his servant to supplement it; a direct order would have caused her distress because the candlesticks were of silver and the 'guest' was a recently released convict:

- (E8) 'The lamp,' said the bishop, 'gives a very poor light.'

Madame Magloire understood him, and going to his bed-chamber, took from the mantel the two silver candlesticks, lighted the candles, and placed them on the table.

17.4.2 Tentativeness

A parallel strategy for politeness is that of tentativeness. Tentativeness implies hesitation, a carefully planned effort to show some caution and, as it were, a lack of confidence. What is the motivation to be tentative? Tentativeness for speakers of English makes for politeness because it makes language do things in a less bold and more cautious way. The modal verbs *could*, *might*, *should/ would* are tentative counterparts of *can*, *may*, *shall/will*. Therefore 73, 74, 75 and 76 are more polite than 77, 78, 79 and 80

- (73) Could you hold the bag for me?
 (74) Might I write to her?
 (75) Would you put the chair away?
 (76) I should be perfectly happy if I had nothing to do.

- (77) Can you hold the bag for me?
- (78) May I write to her?
- (79) Will you put the chair away?
- (80) I shall be perfectly happy if I had nothing to do.

Modals are not the only signals of tentativeness. Consider the following:

- (81) Rakesh is not very clever, but he does try.

The speaker knows that Rakesh's reputation is not very good, so he resorts to *cautious praise*; 'he does try'. If you should think up the question to which 81 is a reply, you could see the tentativeness/caution in the praise given: 'What do you think of Rakesh?' 'Well, he does try.' In addition to modals certain words make for tentativeness and therefore speakers often use them to be polite. Consider the use of *maybe* when making a suggestion and of *quite* in negative sentences in expressing disagreement:

- (82) Maybe we should ask Ravi for his opinion.
- (83) I didn't quite understand what it was all about.

In doing certain things with language politely, speakers also take recourse to formulate expressions. The fact is that a certain expression is so closely associated with a function that over a period of time it becomes a formula. Take for example the expression *I'm afraid*. It is often used as a polite phrase (a) when giving bad news or unpleasant information; (b) when disagreeing with someone; and (c) when turning down a request politely. It suggests an apologetic attitude. The construction with *so/not* (I'm afraid so/I'm afraid not) is often used in answers:

(a)

- (84) I'm afraid I forgot to post the letter.
- (85) I'm afraid your son has failed the exams.
- (86) Did she marry the man she loved? I'm afraid not.
- (87) Do I have to pay the fine?
I'm afraid so.

(b)

- (88) I'm afraid I can't accept your suggestions.
- (89) I'm afraid you didn't quite understand me.

(c)

- (90) Can I borrow your bike?
I'm afraid I can't lend it today.
- (91) Can you help me?
I'm afraid not. I'm busy right now.

17.5 SIGNALS OF POLITENESS

In the many examples given in sections 34.3 and 34.4, speakers very often signalled politeness by using modals (e.g., *can*, *should*, *would*) and certain words and expressions (e.g., *please*, *I'm afraid*). Are these the only language resources for signalling politeness? In this section we shall attempt an answer to this question.

When they do things with language and they have to be polite, speakers of English draw upon three types of language resources to signal politeness: intonation, grammar, and vocabulary.

(i) Let us begin with intonation. In many communicative situations direct commands are hardly polite, which are usually spoken on a falling tone:

(92) 'Get out of the 'building.

(93) 'Keep a'way.

The imperative force of the command can be weakened, and to that extent it becomes polite, by using a rising or a falling-rising tone:

(94) 'Keep away children.

(95) 'Don't for'get to 'post the letters.

(96) 'Don't make a noise.

(97) 'Hurry up.

ii) Speakers of English put various aspect of grammar to good use, such as changing the present tense into the past tense, using modals, and taking recourse to the question form, to signal politeness when they do things with language.

In the context of sequence of tenses 'would' is the past tense of 'will', but in signalling politeness it is a tentative equivalent of 'will'. Although 98 is polite,

(98) Will you pass the paper, please?

99 is politer because 'would' makes it tentative:

(99) Would you pass the paper, please?

Similarly, compare 100 and 101:

(100) Are you the captain?

(101) Would you be the' captain?

In a situation of uncertainty, the question in 101 more cautious and therefore polite. The modals *should*, *could*, *might*, *would* as tentative equivalents of *staff*, *can*, *may*, *will* are used to signal politeness in performing many functions. Compare 102 and 103:

(102) It may rain.

(103) It might rain.

The speaker of 103 is hesitant in the absence of any definite knowledge to commit himself about the event and therefore talks about it tentatively and therefore sounds polite. Notice the tentativeness in imposing oneself on someone's time when asking for advice:

(104) How slow would you like me to play?

(105) What do you think I should do?

The past simple tense is the one most often used to talk about the past, but with such verbs as 'wish', 'wonder', 'think', 'hope' it expresses a tentative attitude, suggesting politeness:

- (106) Did you wish to read it now?
- (107) I wondered if you could spare a few minutes for me.
- (108) I thought you might like to go out for a walk.
- (109) I was hoping we could travel together.

The past progressive with 'hope', 'want', 'wonder', 'think' can be used to make a request or suggestion sound more polite, less definite:

- (110) I was wondering if you'd like to spend the afternoon with me.
- (111) Were you wanting to see the secretary?
- (112) We are hoping you will do it.

When we make an invitation or an appeal, we can sound polite if we are persuasive. (We have noted that a request, for example, would sound polite only if it was put across tentatively, but an invitation because of the nature of the function involved would also seem polite if made persuasively.) If we are less tentative, we are persuasive; a negative construction is less tentative and therefore polite in the context of 113 and 114:

- (113) Won't you come in and sit down?
- (114) Couldn't you write to him again?

The imperative force of a command can be toned down by using the tag question *will you/ won't you*:

- (115) 'Don't waste it, will you?
- (116) 'Look after him, won't you?

(iii) On many occasions, speakers of English use certain vocabulary items/expressions to signal politeness: *maybe, perhaps, possibly, wonder, quite frankly, honestly, think, feel, suppose, so to speak, sort of, kind of, in my opinion*. We may call them 'softening' words because they soften the effect of what the speaker is putting across by making it less forceful and direct: they enable the speaker to be polite. Consider the following examples:

- (117) *Perhaps* you ought to discuss it with her.
- (118) Could you *possibly* see me tomorrow?
- (119) I *wonder* if we should go by bus.
- (120) 'What do you think of my book?' '*Frankly*, it's a disaster.'
- (121) I *think* you ought to do it again.

If, for example, you now compare 117, 118 and 121 with 117a, 118a and 121a, you would feel the absence of that extra 'softening' effect that *perhaps, possibly* and *think* helped to bring about:

- (117a) You ought to discuss it with her.
- (118a) Could you see me tomorrow?
- (121a) You ought to do it again.

You may also note that the language resources for politeness discussed above can be used singly or in combination. Consider, For example, the following:

- (122) *Could* you write to her?

The tentative modal 'could' signals politeness but 122 can be expressed more politely by also using a 'softening' word:

- (123) Could you *possibly* write to her?

We can similarly use several softening words together to make a request, suggestion, disagreement, etc. even more tentative:

- (124) Your proposal is interesting but *I think maybe* it is not *quiet* practicable.

17.6 DIFFERENT DEGREES OF POLITENESS

The discussion and examples above have pointed to the phenomenon of different degrees of politeness in doing things with English. Consider the following examples:

- (125) Will you help the child out of the pit?
(126) Would you help the child out of the pit?

126 is more polite than 125. Take a few more examples:

- (127) I wonder whether you would help the child out of the pit.
(128) I was wondering if you would help the child out of the pit.
(129) Do you think you could possibly help the child out of the pit?
(130) I was wondering if you could possibly help the child out of the pit.

127, 128, 129 and 130 are more polite than 125 and 126. Of the six forms given above, 130 is the most polite. The change in the degree of politeness is signalled by either a change from a modal verb to a tentative modal verb (e.g., 'will' to 'would') or from a less direct to a more indirect form (e.g., 'would you' to 'I wonder whether you would' / 'Do you think you could.'). The more indirect you are, the more polite you would sound. But there is a need for caution in varying the degrees of politeness. The change from one degree of politeness to another degree is relative to certain factors in the situation in which polite forms are required. For example, if the speaker feels that an offer will be to the advantage of the hearer, he would sound polite by using a direct form:

- (131) Have a cup of tea; it will comfort you.

If the speaker does not know whether an offer will be acceptable, he will tend to use an indirect form:

- (132) Would you like to have a cup of tea?

Furthermore, if the speaker and the hearer hardly know each other, he would use an even more indirect form:

- (133) I was wondering whether you would like a cup of tea.

If forms which seem to be 'too polite' are used regardless of taking note of such factors in the situation they would sound pompous or impolite. The speaker can also use them to express sarcasm or annoyance. For example (teacher to student):

- (134) Rakesh, I wonder whether you would like to take down notes.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Of the sentences given below, some express a communicative function directly and the others somewhat indirectly. Change the direct expressions into indirect forms and the indirect expressions into more indirect forms. One example has been done for you.

1. Put all your books away.
Ans. (a) Will you put all your books away?
(b) Would you put all your books away?
(c) I was wondering whether you would put all your books away.

2. Have another mango.

3. Unlock the door.

4. Will you post all the letters?

5. I wonder whether you would write to him.

6. Would you leave it to him?

7. I thank you for the help.

8. I wish you success in life.

2. Help the speaker of the following to put across his uncertain opinions and desires more tentatively than he has put them down in the given sentences. One example has been done for you.

1. I think the letter will arrive next week.
I should think the letter will arrive next week.

2. I think she's wrong.

3. It seems his ideas are half-baked.

4. I say he is mistaken.

5. 'Do you think it will rain?' 'I say not.'

6. 'What's she going to do now?' 'I cannot say.'

17.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we had a careful look at polite forms and their use in a number of communicative functions. We considered in some detail the principles of politeness that prompt speakers of English to use polite forms. The principle of not imposing on your hearer prompts the speaker to ask for his hearer's permission in order to enquire about his personal affairs: *May I ask you what salary they have offered you?* The principle of giving your hearer options enjoins the speaker to use the question form for such a function as making a request: *Could you lend me some money?* The principle of making your hearer feel good suggests to the speaker that he should use

language forms that reflect, for example, distance or familiarity that obtains between them: *Hi, how about going to the movies tonight?* It is important to note that politeness should not be missed out in functions such as requests, offers and invitations that call for it. Conversely, it should not be indicated where it is not required; the 'please' in the following is therefore misplaced: *You can have it, please.* Two main strategies for constructing polite forms are 'indirectness' and 'tentativeness', for example: *Shall I move this furniture into your office? Perhaps you'd like to let me know when you leave.* Speakers of English use intonation, some aspects of grammar and rather a limited number of words and expressions to signal politeness: *'Post the "letter for me, won't you; I was wondering whether you would take another look at it; Perhaps you ought to write to her.* Some situations ask for the usual polite forms in performing such functions as making a request or an offer; some other situations ask for more polite forms. The choice, for example, between *you would find this book easier* and *I wonder if you would find this book easier* has to be made with care. Sometimes speakers use several softening words together to make the suggestion, request, etc., very polite: *Z was wondering whether you could possibly call on him tomorrow.* Forms of language which are considered to be polite in English can sometimes seem strange or odd to speakers of other languages. When learning a language other than your mother tongue, it is often necessary to learn which things to say politely and how.

17.8 KEYWORDS

Tentative Modals: When *should/would* are used with certain verbs such as 'like', 'think', 'say', they make the statement sound less bold and more hesitant. Similarly, when they are used to make offers, requests, and invitations, they imply an attitude of non-imposition and help to signal politeness. It is therefore convenient to call them tentative modals when they are used in this way.

They are commonly used for making a statement tentative when we are giving a slightly uncertain opinion or asking a cautious question: *Z would say the bridge will be completed by the end of the year. Excuse me, would you be the father of the girl.*

When making a request, only *should/would* is used with the verb 'like'. *Would you like some apple juice? (*Will you like some apple juice?)*

In the context of making requests, and some other functions, *would and might* are tentative modals: *Could you see me tomorrow?*

Conditional *should/would*: The conditional *should/would* are used in conditional sentences, most of which depend on the word 'if: *If I climbed up the stairs, I would pant.* (Note that in such constructions the past tense of the verb in the 'if' clause refers to future time. And the past tense is used to imply 'doubt' in opposition to the idea of a 'distinct possibility'). The conditional tense is also used in implied conditions, when we are imagining a possibility, rather than stating a fact. For example, the implied condition in 'This would be wrong' is: 'This would be wrong if you said it', or something similar.

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Could you get me an aspirin?
2. Can you give me an aspirin?

- 3 Would you like an aspirin?
 Shall I get you an aspirin?
- 4 Do you mind if I use your bicycle pump?
 Is it all right if I use your bicycle pump? Can
 I use your bicycle pump?
 Would it be all right if I used your bicycle pump?
- 5 Would you like some tea?
 How about some tea?
- 6 Is it all right if I take 4 chairs from your room? Would
 you mind if I took 4 chairs from your room?

2. 1,6,8

Check Your Progress 2

1. 1. Would you like another mango?
 Would you like to have/care for another mango?
2. Would you unlock the door?
 Would you mind unlocking the door?
3. I was wondering if you would post all the letters!
 I wonder if you will post all the letters.
4. I was wondering whether you could write to him.
 I was wondering whether you could possibly write to him.
6. I wonder whether you would leave it to him.
 I wondered whether you would leave it to him.
7. I would like to thank you for the help.
8. I would wish you success in life.
2. 1. I should/would think she's wrong.
2. It would seem his ideas are half-baked.
3. I should say he is mistaken.
4. 'Do you think it will rain?' 'I should say not.'
5. 'What's she going to do now?' 'I'd rather not say.'