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Politeness and Psychological Distance: A Construal Level Perspective

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Abstract

According to politeness theory (P. Brown & S. Levinson, 1987), politeness serves to both reflect and regulate social distance. On the basis of this notion and on construal level theory (N. Liberman & Y. Trope, 2008; N. Liberman, Y. Trope, & E. Stephan, 2007), it was predicted that politeness would be related to abstract construal, temporal distance, and spatial distance. Eight studies supported this prediction. Politeness increased when the addressees were construed abstractly (Study 1), were temporally distant (Studies 2, 3), and were spatially distant (Study 4). It was also found that increasing politeness produced abstract construals (Study 5), greater temporal distance (Study 6), and greater spatial distance (Study 7, 8). These findings shed light on the way politeness operates in different cultures and is conveyed in different languages, and they support the idea that dimensions of psychological distance are interrelated.

Keywords

politeness; psychological distance; social distance; construal level theory

Politeness is an integral part of life in any human society. Whenever we address a person, we choose how polite to be, ranging from polite forms such as “dear Professor Friedman” to the more colloquial “hey, Ron.” How polite we choose to be not only reflects how close we feel to a person but also helps to create or maintain the feeling of closeness or distance. Goffman's (1959) symbolic interactionism theory describes the many ways people use to communicate, create, and maintain social roles. In this theory, social distance is a prime characteristic of social roles, and politeness serves to regulate social distance. More recent theories of politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987) share the view that politeness serves to both signify and create social distance.

Following this assumption, we examine the regularities in the way people use politeness that might result from the relation between politeness and social distance. Specifically, using the framework of construal level theory (CLT; Liberman & Trope, 2008; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003), we argue that social distance is a type of psychological distance that is related to other distances and to level of construal. We therefore predict that increased politeness is associated with a higher level of construal and with greater temporal and spatial distances. We derive this prediction in more detail from politeness theory and from CLT.

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Politeness

P. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that three aspects of interpersonal situations are universally related to politeness: (a) the relative power of the addressee over the speaker, (b) the degree of imposition of the to-be-performed act, and (c) the social distance between the speaker and the addressee. According to Brown and Levinson, speakers use more polite language when addressing individuals with high status than individuals with equal or low status, when asking for a big favor than a small favor, and when addressing strangers than familiar people.

A considerable amount of research has supported the predicted effects on politeness of power (e.g., Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; 1992), imposition (e.g., R. Brown & Gilman, 1989; Holtgraves & Yang, 1992), and social distance (e.g., Holtgraves & Yang, 1992; Wood & Kroger, 1991). For example, Ambady, Koo, Lee, and Rosenthal (1996) examined how politeness strategies were related to power and imposition. Participants imagined real-life targets of different power (a superior, a subordinate, or a peer from their workplace) and conveyed to this target more imposing or less imposing news. These communications were videotaped and coded by judges for politeness, using P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) typology of politeness strategies (e.g., less polite strategies, such as seeking agreement, joking, and expressing optimism vs. more polite strategies, such as being apologetic or minimizing the imposition). Consistent with the predictions of politeness theory, participants in both American and Korean samples used more polite strategies and fewer less-polite strategies for targets with higher power and when communicating more imposing contents (see Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990, for another demonstration of the effect of status and imposition on politeness).

Of particular relevance to the current research is a study by Holtgraves and Yang (1992), who examined how politeness was affected by social distance, power, and imposition. Participants from the United States and from Korea imagined themselves making a request varying in size (e.g., asking for the time vs. asking another person to make a phone call) to an addressee of varying power (e.g., a high school student vs. a professor) and social distance (a stranger vs. a well-known target). Participants' responses were coded in terms of P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. Specifically, *address forms* were coded as informal (e.g., first name) versus formal (e.g., title) versus absence of the address. *The act of the request* was coded as a least polite (bald) strategy if an imperative was used, as a low politeness (positive) strategy (e.g., expressing optimism or using slang), as a more polite (negative) strategy (e.g., questioning the addressee's willingness or ability to perform the act), as a very polite (off record) strategy (e.g., if an indirect form was used by asserting the speaker's need), and as the most polite strategy when no request was made. Consistent with politeness theory, politeness increased with request size, higher status of the addressee, and social distance. In addition, although relatively small compared with the main effects, significant interactions among power, request size, and distance were also found. These interactions suggested that with less imposing requests, the effects of power and social distance increased.

Politeness theory suggests that if power and imposition are held constant, then politeness will vary as a function of social distance. Holtgraves and Yang's (1992) results also suggest that the relation between politeness and social distance would be especially pronounced in low-imposition communications. In the present research, we therefore minimized power differences (by examining communication between same-status interlocutors) and imposition (by focusing on requests for small favors and unthreatening communications) and explored politeness as a means to signify and create social distance between interlocutors.

Along with the theory of politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987), we conceptualize politeness as being both a meaningful way to signify (or reflect) social distance and as means to create (or regulate) social distance from an interlocutor. For example, a speaker can choose a very polite way of addressing a colleague *to reflect* the relatively large interpersonal distance between them but also *to increase* the social distance between them.[1] The literature on politeness, as the research cited earlier illustrates, has focused on politeness as a signifier of social distance. To demonstrate the complementary function of politeness as a regulator of social distance, we conducted a preliminary experiment, showing that people prefer more polite language when they need to create a sense of greater social distance.[2]

The aim of the present research was to examine some of the implications of the association between politeness and social distance. If, as the theory of politeness suggests, politeness reflects and regulates social distance, and if, as CLT suggests, social distance is a type of psychological distance, then politeness would show the same regularities exhibited by other psychological distances. In the present article, we explore the implication of these regularities for the way politeness is enacted and perceived.

CLT of Psychological Distance

CLT assumes that a stimulus is psychologically distant when it is not part of one's direct experience of oneself, here and now. Psychologically distant stimuli belong to the past or the future rather than the present; they take place in distant places rather than here, or occur to other people rather than to oneself. The greater the temporal, spatial, or social distance from a stimulus, the more psychologically distant it appears to be (see Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Liberman & Trope, 2008). Moreover, because distal stimuli cannot be experienced directly, they are mentally construed: They are imagined, remembered, predicted but not perceived.

Two core hypotheses that follow from this analysis are of particular relevance to the present article: First, the different psychological distances would affect and be affected by level of construal. Second, the different psychological distances would be cognitively interrelated. Next, we examine each of these hypotheses and apply them to politeness.

Psychological Distances Are Associated With Level of Construal

Any event or object can be represented at different levels of construal. Lower level construals are concrete, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events. Higher level construals are abstract, schematic, and

[1]Of course, politeness may affect social distance only within an acceptable range of politeness. That is, social norms specify the acceptable range of politeness in a specific situation, within which the speaker may choose to be more or less polite and thereby reduce or increase the sense of interpersonal closeness. For example, the way a professor may address an unfamiliar student is limited in its range of politeness. Within that range, however, choosing a more colloquial phrase may create a sense of greater closeness than choosing a formal phrase.

[2]The theory of politeness views politeness as both reflecting and creating social distance. Our article does not examine these assumptions of the theory of politeness but, rather, builds on them. Nevertheless, because all the empirical studies we could find demonstrated only the function of politeness as signifying distance, and because some of our studies rely on its distance-producing function, we set also to demonstrate the distance-producing function of politeness. A study with both an Israeli sample (n = 34; 7 women, 27 men) and an American sample (n = 56; 21 women, 35 men) of undergraduate students asked participants to create a sense of social closeness or social remoteness with a fellow stranger student in an ostensibly upcoming getting-acquainted conversation. The first five sentences of the conversation were said to be prescripted, and participants were asked to choose between two versions of each of these five sentences. The two versions varied in pretested politeness. For example, “First of all, I would like to introduce myself,” versus “I'll start by telling you a little bit about myself.” We coded each choice of a polite version as 1 and each choice of a less polite version as 0 and summed these scores across the five sentences for each participant. We found that in both samples, more polite sentences were used when the goal was to create social remoteness (Israeli sample M = 0.65, SD = 0.37; American sample M = 0.87, SD = 0.24) than when the goal was to create social closeness (Israeli sample M = 0.17, SD = 0.14; American sample M = 0.19, SD = 0.26), both ts > 5.24, p < .001. This study demonstrated that participants use politeness to create social distance or social proximity with another person.

decontextualized representations that extract the gist from the available information. They emphasize superordinate features of events and omit incidental features that may vary without significantly changing the meaning of events. For example, “maintaining hygienic conditions” is a higher level representation of “mop the floor in a restaurant.”

Objects that are more distant on any dimension will be represented at a more abstract, higher level of construal because higher level construals capture those features of objects that remain relatively invariant with increasing distance. Well in advance, one knows that someone will have to take care of hygiene, but the details of exactly what will need to be done may become apparent only closer to the action. High-level features tend to change less than low-level features across social distance: Many people take care of hygiene, but only specific social groups mop restaurant floors.

The hypothesized effect of psychological distance on level of construal has been documented in research on temporal distance (e.g., Liberman, Sagristano, & Trope, 2002; Liberman & Trope, 1998), spatial distance (Fujita, Henderson, Eng, Trope, & Liberman, 2006; Henderson, Fujita, Trope, & Liberman, 2006), and social distance (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008). For example, Liberman and Trope (1998) found that distant future activities were described in terms of abstract, superordinate goals (“why” terms), whereas near future activities were described in terms of subordinate goals (“how” terms). Similarly, Liberman et al., (2002) found that the same set of items was classified into broader, more abstract categories when the items were part of more distant future activities. There is also research showing that people form more abstract construals of other people than of themselves and of unfamiliar others than of familiar others (e.g., Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Idson & Mischel, 2001; Prentice, 1990). A prime example is the actor—observer effect, whereby people tend to explain others' behaviors in abstract dispositional terms and their own behavior in concrete situational terms (e.g., Fiedler, Semin, Finkenauer, & Berkel, 1995; Jones & Nisbett, 1972; Watson, 1982).

Level of construal is not only affected by distance but may also affect distance. Construing an object at a higher level connects it to other objects that span across a wider range in time, space, and social perspectives and therefore brings to mind more distal times, places, and people. For example, “maintaining hygiene” relative to “mopping the floor” includes experiences that span across wider time and space and pertain to more diverse individuals. Indeed, it has been shown that people perceive the same stimulus as more proximal when it is construed on a lower level. For example, Liberman, Trope, McCrea, and Sherman (2007) found that construing activities in higher level terms (e.g., by identifying activities in “why” rather than “how” terms) fostered the perception of the more distant future as appropriate for their enactment (see also McCrea, Liberman, Trope, & Sherman, 2008). Research also suggests that abstractness may increase social distance. For example, Rubini and Kruglanski (1997) showed that interviewers who used more abstract questions were perceived by interviewees as conveying less positive rapport, which may be viewed as indicative of greater social distance.[3]

According to CLT, the effects of distance on construal and of construal on distance are overgeneralized, such that they persist even in the absence of the initial reason that gave rise

[3]Previous research also pointed to valence-mediated effect of abstractness on distance. For example, Reitsma Van Rooijen, Semin, and Van Leeuwen (2007) showed that abstractness accentuates the valence of a message, resulting in valence-consistent perception of closeness (i.e., a more abstract negative message is perceived as more negative and creates more dislike and distance. Conversely, a more abstract positive message is more positive and creates more liking and more closeness). Without questioning the existence of that valence-mediated effect of abstractness, our work focuses on the relationship between abstractness and politeness that is not mediated by valence. We predicted (and actually found) that construing a person's action in higher level terms would enhance perceived social distance from him or her, even without being more negative.

to the association. That is, remoteness is expected to produce a higher level of construal even when low-level details are not particularly likely to change over distance, and high-level construal is expected to produce estimations of greater distance even when they do not afford retrieval of particularly distal exemplars. Supporting the notion of an overgeneralized association, a recent study by Bar-Anan, Liberman, and Trope (2006) showed automatic associations of construal level with all four psychological distances using an implicit association test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998).

If politeness is associated with social distance, and if social distance is associated with high levels of construal, then politeness, too, might be associated with high levels of construal. Moreover, the association might be bidirectional. That is, politeness would be expressed in the use of more abstract language, and construing persons more abstractly would lead to addressing them more politely. Indeed, more abstract expressions seem more polite than concrete expressions. For example, “May I have a fork?” (the more general way of referring to an object) is more polite than “Could you please give me this fork?” even if both utterances clearly refer to the same object. Would politeness be associated with abstractness irrespective of communication conventions? This is one of the two questions we explore in the present article. We predict that people will be more polite toward an addressee whom they construe more abstractly, and that increased politeness will promote more abstract construals.

Psychological Distances Are Cognitively Interrelated

CLT maintains that because all psychological distances are anchored at the same zero point of the self in the here and now, and because different distances are similarly associated with (i.e., affect and are affected by) construal, the different dimensions of psychological distance should be associated with each other. Indeed, Bar-Anan, Liberman, Trope, and Algom (2007) found evidence for the automatic associations of distance dimensions with a picture–word version of the Stroop task (Stroop, 1935). Participants viewed perspective pictures, on which a superimposed arrow pointed to either a proximal or a distal location in the picture. Inside the arrow a word was printed, which was related to temporal distance (“tomorrow” or “year”) in some studies and social distance (“us” or “them”) in other studies. Participants classified the spatial distance of the arrow faster when the word's psychological distance matched its spatial distance than when the word's meaning mismatched its spatial distance (e.g., a spatially close word was classified faster when it was “us” than when it was “them”). Also, participants classified the word's meaning faster when its meaning matched its spatial distance than when its meaning did not match its spatial distance (e.g., a word was classified faster as saying “tomorrow” rather than “year” when it was spatially proximal than when it was spatially distal). These findings suggest that spatial distance is associated with temporal distance and social distance and that psychological distance, the meaning these distance dimensions have in common, is accessed automatically.

If the different distances are cognitively associated, as Bar-Anan et al.'s (2007) findings showed, then they may also influence each other. Thus, on the basis of the association between distances, we predict that distance from a stimulus on one dimension may make it seem more distant on other dimensions. The implication for politeness is straightforward: Because politeness is associated with social distance, it would affect and be affected by temporal distance and spatial distance. Indeed, using future and past verbal tenses appears more polite than using present tenses. For example, “I was wondering” is perceived as more polite than “I am wondering.” Likewise, standing farther away is typically considered more polite than standing close by. Would politeness be related to spatial distance and temporal distance irrespective of communication conventions? This is the second question we examine in the present article. We predict, for example, that people will be more polite when they expect their message to be read in the distant future than in the near future and that a

politely described action will seem more temporally remote than the same action that is described in a less polite way.

The Present Research

The present research examines how politeness affects and is affected by level of construal, temporal distance, and spatial distance. We examine the effects on politeness of level of construal (Study 1), temporal distance (Studies 2a, 2b, and 3), and spatial distance (Study 4). We also examine the reverse direction of influence, namely, the effects of politeness on level of construal (Study 5), temporal distance (Study 6), and spatial distance (Studies 7 and 8).

Study 1: The Effect of Construal Level on Politeness

Study 1 examined whether more abstract construals promote the perception of greater politeness. It seems that across a number of languages, more abstract linguistic forms are used to communicate politeness. For example, French and Russian use the plural form (e.g., *vous*) in addressing an individual to express more politeness. In Study 1, we manipulated level of construal in two ways. In some of the items, we asked participants to describe a protagonist's actions in high-level "why" terms or low-level "how" terms (Strack, Schwarz, & Gschneidinger, 1985; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987; see also Freitas, Gollwitzer, & Trope, 2004; Fujita, Trope, Liberman, & Levin-Sagi, 2006; Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007, for research using this procedure as a manipulation of level of construal). In other items, we manipulated level of construal by asking participants to generate either a dispositional (high-level construal) or situational (low-level construal) explanation of a protagonist's action (see Nussbaum, Trope, & Liberman, 2003, for a similar conceptualization of dispositional vs. situational attributions in terms of levels of construal).[4]

In each item, after the manipulation of construal level, participants imagined themselves addressing the protagonist with a request and wrote it down. They then indicated how polite their request was. We predicted that participants would be more polite after construing the target on a high level than after construing him or her on a low level.

Method

Participants—Forty-eight introductory psychology students (29 women, 19 men) from Tel-Aviv University (Tel-Aviv, Israel) participated in the study for course credit (ages 18–28 years, $M = 23$). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and completed the questionnaire individually.

Procedure—Participants read about a student performing an action and then described the action in either high- or low-level terms, depending on the experimental condition. One part of the questionnaire presented six actions and manipulated level of construal by instructing participants to describe either why (high level) or how (low level) a target person performed

[4]We conceptualized dispositional explanations as high-level construals of behavior and situational inferences as low-level construals of behavior. We acknowledge that, in principle, it is possible to have very general, abstract situational explanations (e.g., "literary trends in the 20th century explain his letter") as well as specific dispositional explanations (e.g., "she drove there because she likes to eat Chicago pizza when she feels sad"). However, in practice, when people explain the behavior of others (especially the behavior of strangers, which was the case in our studies; see Idson & Mischel, 2001), they tend to use general dispositional attributions and concrete situational attributions. Consistent with this idea, Fiedler et al., (1995) suggested conceptualizing the actor–observer effect in attribution (the tendency to attribute one's own behavior to situations and other people's behavior to dispositions) as a tendency to think more abstractly about others than about the self. In their article, they showed empirically that dispositional attributions tend to be more abstract than situational attribution. Nussbaum, Trope, and Liberman (2003) showed that temporal distance increases dispositional attributions and reduces situational attributions. In that article, too, it was argued and empirically shown that dispositional attributions tend to be more abstract than situational attributions.

an action. For example, “Maya is looking for a book in the library. Please try to imagine the situation and write why (how) Maya is doing this.” The additional actions participants described were hurrying to a class, buying lunch, buying groceries, ordering a book, and scheduling courses.

The other part of the questionnaire presented another set of six actions and instructed participants to provide either a dispositional (high-level) or a situational (low-level) explanation for the actors' behavior. For example, “Raymond is explaining next week's assignment to another student. What in Raymond's personality, character or disposition (in the situation or the setting) could explain his behavior?” The additional actions were speaking loudly on a cell phone, inviting students in the class to a birthday party, smoking, reading a book on Tibet, and feeding a stray cat. Level of construal was manipulated between participants and was the same across the two parts of the questionnaire.

In both parts of the study, participants then imagined addressing the target person with a request or a remark. For example, participants wrote how they would ask Raymond about the assignment. Then participants indicated how politely and how formally they addressed the target on scales ranging from 1 (*not especially polite; informal*) to 7 (*very polite; very formal*).[5]

Results

For each item, a politeness score was computed by averaging the ratings on politeness and formality (the mean within-subject correlation between politeness and formality ratings across the 12 questionnaire items was .91). Table 1 presents the mean politeness scores. We normalized these scores within each item (because different situations could have generated different levels of politeness) and averaged them within each manipulation type (how/why, situation/personality).

The politeness scores were submitted to a 2 (Level: high vs. low) × 2 (Manipulation Type: how/why vs. situation/personality) analysis of variance. The first variable was manipulated between participants. As predicted, participants addressed more politely targets that they construed on a high level (i.e., “why” identifications of actions, $M = 0.18$, $SD = 0.7$, and dispositional attributions, $M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.6$) than targets that they construed on a low level (i.e., “how” identifications of actions, $M = -0.19$, $SD = 0.7$, and situational attributions, $M = -0.18$, $SD = 0.8$), $F(1, 46) = 4.1$, $p < .05$. No other effects were significant (Fs < 1). Because request imposition and status were kept constant across construal-level conditions, we believe that greater politeness reflected an increased social distance in the higher construal condition. Studies 2–5 examined whether temporal and spatial distances would have a similar effect on politeness.

[5]In this study and several other studies in this article, we preferred to use participants' own ratings of how polite they were, rather than judges' ratings of politeness, because we could not obtain sufficiently reliable ratings by judges of written materials. Here are a number of reasons: Existing coding schemata for politeness distinguish between direct requests (which are less polite) and indirect requests (which are more polite). In our sample, however, indirect requests were extremely rare. Another way to code politeness is by counting words such as “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me.” These, too, were relatively rare in our sample. We also tried to make judges rate overall politeness of the written messages with no coding schema. Unfortunately, these ratings yielded middling, undifferentiated, and unreliable scores of politeness (e.g., low between-judges correlations). We think that although overall ratings of politeness were successfully applied in coding videotaped behavior (e.g., Gonzales et al., 1990), these are less suitable to code written messages, because the latter lack important nonlinguistic cues, such as tone of voice and posture. We think that self-ratings of politeness overcome exactly this difficulty, because participants may access their intended level of politeness (e.g., the “tone” they had in mind when writing the message) that is not fully reflected in the written message. However, some of our studies (Study 2b, Study 4) used judges' ratings of recorded verbal (rather than written) messages as an additional dependent measure of politeness.

Study 2: The Effect of Temporal Distance on Enacted Politeness

Like abstractness, temporal distance appears to be used in language to signify politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). In a preliminary study, we presented participants with sentences that used future or present tense in a request, without changing its meaning. Participants judged which of the requests was more polite. For example, they were presented with the phrase “Is it (Will it be) okay if I come tomorrow to study with you?” As predicted, the phrases that used a future tense were judged as more polite than those that used the present tense. However, one could argue that a future tense might sound less imposing than present tense and thus affect perception of politeness through imposition, rather than temporal distance. To address this potential confound, in Study 2, we manipulated temporal distance within the larger situational context of the request rather than within the request itself. Specifically, we asked participants to write instructions or recommendations to other participants, who were expected to use them in either the near future or the distant future. We predicted that instructions and recommendations would be more polite when intended for more distant future use. In Study 2a participants provided written messages and judged their own level of politeness, whereas in Study 2b they provided oral messages, which were rated by independent judges.

Study 2a

Method

Participants: Forty psychology students (29 women, 11 men) from Tel-Aviv University enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated in the study for a course credit (ages 18–37 years, $M = 23.9$). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and completed the questionnaire individually.

Procedure: Participants were asked to write to another student advising him or her on (a) how to do well in a specific course, (b) how to get to the library, (c) how to prepare for the SAT, (d) what places to visit in Tel-Aviv, and (e) how to behave in a psychology experiment. We told participants that their advice would be read by another participant either the next day (in the near future condition) or next year (in the distant future condition). After responding to each item, participants indicated how politely and how formally they addressed the target on scales ranging from 1 (*not especially polite; informal*) to 7 (*very polite; very formal*).

Result: For each item, a politeness score was computed by averaging the politeness and formality scales (the mean within-subject correlation between ratings on these scales was . 92). Table 2 presents politeness scores for each item. Politeness scores were normalized within each item, averaged across items, and compared between the temporal distance conditions. As predicted, participants were less polite when they expected the addressee to read the instructions in the near future ($M = -0.25$, $SD = 0.8$) than when they expected him or her to read the instructions in the distant future ($M = 0.25$, $SD = 0.5$), $t(38) = -2.3$, $p < .05$.

Study 2b

Study 2b was intended to replicate Study 2a with a different measure of politeness. Specifically, instead of using participants' own ratings of the politeness of their messages, we used independent judges' coding of participants' voice-recorded messages. We used oral, rather than written, messages because both past research and our own pretesting suggested that politeness coding of written messages are less reliable, possibly because relevant cues are lost (e.g., tone of voice, pace).

Method

Participants: Thirty-five introductory psychology students from Tel-Aviv University (26 women, 9 men; ages 18–27 years, $M = 23$) participated in the study for course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and completed the procedure individually.

Procedure: Participants were invited to take part in a study on passing along personal experience. They were asked to imagine a fellow student who would appreciate an advice on (a) how to behave during the SAT exam, (b) how to rent an apartment in Tel-Aviv, and (c) how to prepare for an exam in introductory psychology. We told participants that another participant would listen to their recorded message when they faced the relevant issue, either 1 week from then (the near future condition) or 6 months from then (the distant future condition). We recorded each message before introducing the next topic. After recoding all the messages, we played back each message to the participant and asked him or her to rate it for politeness on scales that ranged from 1 (*informal, not especially polite*) to 7 (*formal, very polite*). We also obtained ratings on the same scales of two independent judges who were blind to the experimental conditions.

Results: *Self-rated politeness* scores were computed for each item by averaging politeness and formality scales (the mean within-subject correlation across the questionnaire items was .82). We normalized politeness scores for each of the three activities and computed their mean. As predicted, self-rated politeness was higher when participants thought that the addressee would receive the message in the distant future ($M = 0.29$, $SD = 0.70$) than in the near future ($M = -0.27$, $SD = 0.95$), $t(33) = 2.02$, $p < .05$.

Judges-rated politeness was obtained by averaging the ratings provided by the two judges on politeness and formality scales (the within-subject correlation between the ratings of politeness and formality averaged .98 and .97 for the two judges; interrater reliability > .7). The scores were normalized within the items and averaged across the items. The mean within-subject (across-items) correlation between self-ratings and judges' ratings of politeness across the items was .64. Consistent with our predictions, participants were judged as more polite when they addressed a distant future advisee ($M = 0.30$, $SD = 0.79$) than a near future advisee ($M = -0.28$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(33) = 2.03$, $p < .05$.

Study 3: The Effect of Temporal Distance on Politeness Expected by Observers

Studies 2a and 2b showed that people were more polite when they expected the addressee to receive their message in the more distant future. Would they also expect others to communicate more politely when they talked about the more distant future? The preset study examined this question. Participants read a conversation in which a speaker told his or her acquaintance about an action he or she intended to perform in either the near future or the distant future. Participants chose between a colloquial phrasing and a formal phrasing of the intended action. According to P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) ordering of politeness strategies, slang or colloquial language is relatively low in politeness (a positive strategy that indicates presumed closeness with the addressee), whereas formal, normative language is relatively high in politeness (a negative strategy; see also Holtgraves & Yang, 1992, for a similar coding of slang vs. formal language). We predicted that normative phrasings would be chosen more frequently as ways of communicating about more temporally distant activities.

Method

Participants—Forty introductory psychology students from Tel-Aviv University (25 women, 15 men) participated in the study for course credit (ages 18–34 years, $M = 22$). Participants completed the questionnaire individually.

Procedure—To develop the stimulus materials for this experiment, we asked informants to express the same ideas once in a more formal, normative way and once in a less formal, colloquial way. Four independent judges then rated the generated responses on formality and politeness. We chose for the study pairs of expressions that yielded consistent judgments (e.g., expressions that were generated in response to a request to be colloquial and were judged as low on formality and politeness by the judges).

In the main experiment, participants read eight incomplete sentences in which a speaker tells his or her acquaintance about something she or he intends to do in the near (distant) future and chose between normative and colloquial ways of completing the sentences. For example, "Dana is telling her acquaintance that she is going on vacation to Greece tomorrow (next month). She says that she expects to ____ enjoy it very much/have a lot of fun." Participants indicated the preferred way of completing the sentence. The other normatively (colloquially) phrased items in the questionnaire referred to telling someone about driving (giving a lift to) a friend to a train station, asking another student to stop bothering you (getting off you) with questions, saving (putting aside) money to buy a bicycle, spending (fiddling away) money, highlighting (marking) key phrases in a textbook, calling (giving a call to) a friend, and being left (getting stuck) home without a car.[6]

Results

A choice of the colloquial phrase (low politeness) was coded 0, and a choice of the normative phrase (high politeness) was coded 1. A politeness score was computed by averaging the scores across items. Table 3 presents these scores for each item in the near future and the distant future conditions. As predicted, participants chose fewer polite phrases to complete sentences about near future intentions ($M = 0.4$, $SD = 0.17$) than about distant future intentions ($M = 0.5$, $SD = 0.17$), $t(38) = -2.14$, $p < .05$. These results suggest that temporal distance from the intended action described in a communication produces an expectation for the use of more polite language in that communication. Communicating about a more distant action is not more imposing than communicating about a near future action, nor does temporal distance affect status differences between the speaker and the addressee. It seems to follow from politeness theory, then, that temporal distance affects politeness through its effect on social distance. This effect is predicted by CLT, which suggests that all dimensions of psychological distance are interrelated. Having established the effect on politeness of construal level (Study 1) and temporal distance (Studies 2 and 3), we now turn to examine the effect on politeness of spatial distance.

Study 4: The Effect of Spatial Distance on Enacted Politeness

Student participants gave advice to another student of the same university who was either spatially near or spatially distant but who was always anonymous and beyond sight. Oral messages were recorded and coded for politeness. We predicted that verbal messages addressed to the more spatially distant target would be judged as more polite.

[6]It should be noted that the study was conducted in Hebrew, and the colloquial forms of the phrases do not correspond literally to the ones used in our study.

Method

Participants—Thirty-eight psychology students from Tel-Aviv University (23 women, 15 men) participated in the study for course credit (ages 19–31 years, $M = 23.4$). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and completed the experimental procedure individually.

Procedure—Participants were told that students from their own university (Tel-Aviv University) were participating in a workshop on "preferences and experience" and that, as a part of the workshop, they collected information about other people's experiences. Participants were informed that each workshop attendee sought advice on a different topic and that the workshop was taking place either in the adjacent building (proximal spatial condition) or in another city, Jerusalem, Israel (distal spatial condition). Participants were then asked to think about their personal experience and advise the participants of the workshop on what movie to see, which courses in psychology to choose, how to manage financial costs of living independently from one's parents, and where to organize a surprise party. We recorded participants' verbal messages, which were then judged for politeness by two independent judges, who were blind to experimental conditions (interjudge reliability > .8), on a scale ranging from 1 (*informal, not especially polite*)to7(*formal, very polite*).

Results

As in previous studies, we averaged the each judge's formality and politeness ratings on each item (the mean within-subject correlations between the ratings were .92 and .95 for each judge) and then averaged the ratings of the two judges. These scores were then normalized within item, and the mean politeness score was computed across items. As predicted, politeness was higher when the messages were addressed to spatially distal targets ($M = 0.59$, $SD = 0.69$) than to spatially proximal targets ($M = -0.53$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(36) = 5.2$, $p < .001$.

In sum, consistent with the predictions of P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and CLT, Studies 1–4 showed that politeness was affected by level of construal of a target person and by his or her temporal and spatial distance. Studies 5–8 explored the reverse direction of influence, namely the effect of politeness on level of construal, temporal distance, and spatial distance.

Study 5: The Effect of Politeness on Level of Construal

To explore the effect of politeness on level of construal, in Study 5, we examined how the intention to be more polite versus less polite affected the abstractness of the speaker's language. Participants completed an open-ended questionnaire, in which they wrote how a person would address a target in a specified situation in a very polite, a moderately polite, or a relatively impolite way. We predicted that abstract verbs would be used more frequently, whereas concrete verbs would be used less frequently with increasing levels of politeness.

Method

Participants—Thirty-one Tel-Aviv University psychology undergraduates (20 women, 11 men) participated in the study for course credit (ages 18–29 years, $M = 21.5$).

Procedure—Participants read five descriptions of situations in which a protagonist addressed another person (e.g., asking to copy lecture notes). Then, each participant wrote what the protagonist would say if she or he were to address the other person in a very polite, a moderately polite, or a relatively impolite way. The order of the questions (from very polite to impolite or vice versa) was counterbalanced across participants and did not have an

effect on the results. For example, participants read “Jack would like to ask a classmate for her notes. What would Jack say to address her in a very polite way (a moderately polite way, a relatively impolite way)?” Other situations involved asking a stranger to change money for a coffee machine, asking a classmate to turn off the air conditioner, asking a secretary to leave a message, or asking students to be quiet in a dorm hall.

The verbs and adjectives in participants' messages were classified according to Semin and Fiedler's (1988) linguistic categorization model (LCM) into categories of increasing abstractness: (a) descriptive action verbs (DAV; e.g., call, meet), (b) interpretive action verbs (IAV; e.g., help, cheat), (c) state verbs (SV; e.g., admire, hate), and (d) adjectives (ADJ; e.g., honest, reliable). For example, “Can you **help** me with some lecture materials?” was coded as more abstract (IAV) than “Can you **show** me some lecture materials?” (DAV). According to Semin and Fiedler's LCM, concrete verbs tend to be highly contextualized and refer to specific objects and physical actions, whereas more abstract verbs and adjectives refer to increasingly less contextualized actions and include more subjective interpretations.

Results

We counted the number of words in each of the four categories (DAV, IAV, SV, and ADJ) and compared these numbers between the three levels of politeness. Consistent with the hypothesis, DAV words, the most concrete category, were used more often in the least polite phrases, $F(2, 60) = 6.7$, $p < .05$, whereas IAV and SV words, the more abstract categories, were used more often in the phrases of intermediate and high politeness, $F(2, 60) = 28.7$, $p < .01$, and $F(2, 60) = 118.6$, $p < .01$, respectively. Adjectives were not used in our sample. Table 4 presents the mean numbers of verbs from each level of abstractness at each level of politeness.

For each participant, we also computed a mean abstractness score for each level of politeness by assigning the value 1 for DAV, 2 for IAV, 3 for SV, and 4 for ADJ and averaging these scores across all the verbs each participant used (see Table 5). We submitted this score to a one-way analysis of variance, with level of politeness as a within-subject variable. The analysis yielded a main effect of politeness, $F(2, 81) = 96.9$, $p < .001$, with a higher abstractness score on the highest level of politeness ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 0.13$) than on the intermediate level ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.25$) or on the lowest level of politeness ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 0.22$). Thus, the results support the prediction that participants used more abstract language to convey more polite messages.

Study 6: The Effect of Politeness on Temporal Distance Estimated by Observers

Study 6 examined the effect of the politeness of a message about an event on the perceived temporal distance of the event. Participants read a statement that was phrased in either colloquial (less polite) or normative (more polite) language. For example, participants in the colloquial (normative) condition read, “Rina said that she is going to read the text and highlight (mark) key phrases.” Participants then indicated how far in the future the protagonist would perform the action. We predicted that enactment times would be shorter for the colloquially phrased activities than for the normatively phrased activities.

Method

Participants—Sixty-four psychology undergraduates (52 women, 12 men) enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Tel-Aviv University participated in the experiment for course credit (ages 19–32 years, $M = 22.9$). The experiment was introduced as a study on how people imagine social situations they read about.

Procedure—We presented participants with 20 short descriptions of situations and asked them to imagine each situation and answer the questions that followed it. For each situation, a colloquial and a normative version were prepared. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the questionnaire. In each version, half of the statements were phrased normatively, and the other statements were phrased colloquially. Versions did not have any effect on the results. The order of the items was counterbalanced across participants and did not have an effect of the results. After reading each statement, participants indicated how far in the future the protagonist would perform the action. We coded these time estimates by translating them into days (e.g., “2 weeks” was coded as 14 in day units, “3 hr” was coded as 3/24 or 0.125 days). Nonnumeric responses were translated into numeric values, according to the following convention: “Couple” was coded as 2 (e.g., “couple of days” was coded as 2, “couple of months” was coded as 60); “few” and “a number of” were coded as 3 (e.g., “a few hours” was coded as 3 hr, that is 3/24 or 0.125 in day units); ranges were coded as the mean value (e.g., “2–4 hr” was coded as 3/24 or 0.125 days). Also transformed into numbers were the following answers, which comprised 10.5% of the responses: “Now,” “immediately,” and “ASAP” were assigned the value of the minimum response within the data set; “long time from now” was assigned the maximum value within the data set. Responses such as “never,” “someday,” “when *X* happens” or “don't know” were coded as missing values (4.2%; see Liberman, Trope, McCrea, & Sherman, 2007, for a similar coding schema).

To examine the effectiveness of our manipulation, we asked participants to indicate how polite the statement was on a scale ranging from 1 (*very impolite*) to 5 (*very polite*). To avoid the possibility that rating politeness would affect the dependent variable (temporal distance), one third of the participants rated the politeness of each statement before estimating time, another third completed the measures in reverse order, and one third of the participants did not rate politeness. There was no order effect on either politeness or estimated temporal distance, and the order conditions were aggregated.

Results

Manipulation check—Colloquial expressions were judged as less polite ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.8$) than normative expressions ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.7$), $t(42) = -5.6$, $p < .001$. This result indicates that colloquial versus normative language effectively manipulated politeness.

Temporal distance—The primary dependent measure was the perceived temporal distance of activity enactment. The estimates of time were positively skewed and were square-root transformed to achieve homogeneity of error variance. Then, enactment times were normalized for each activity. For each participant, we indexed the colloquial statements separately from the normative statements. As predicted, the mean enactment time for the colloquially phrased statement was shorter ($M = -0.05$, $SD = 0.4$) than for the normatively phrased statement ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.6$), $t(63) = -2.1$, $p < .05$. We suggest that this was the case because temporal and social distances are interrelated, so that a reduction in perceived social distance, produced by colloquial language, produces a corresponding reduction in perceived temporal distance.

Study 7: The Effect of Politeness on Spatial Distance Estimated by Observers

Social norms in different cultures prescribe an appropriate spatial distance that should be kept between people in various social situations (Hayduk, 1983). Ordinarily, spatial distance is related to social distance, with greater spatial distance being associated with more politeness, greater social status asymmetry (e.g., Latta, 1978; Lott & Sommer, 1967), and

less familiarity (Ashton, Saw, & Worsham, 1980; Little, 1965). Study 7 examined the effects of politeness on the spatial distance between a speaker and an addressee. Participants read either colloquial or normative phrases that a speaker addressed to another person and estimated the spatial distance between the interlocutors by marking the location of the addressee on a sketch on which the location of speaker was indicated. We predicted that more polite phrases would be associated with greater perceived spatial distance between the inter-locutors.

Method

Participants—Fifty-four introductory psychology students (40 women, 14 men) from Tel-Aviv University participated in the study for course credit (ages 18–37 years, $M = 23.2$). Participants completed the questionnaire individually.

Procedure—Participants read descriptions of 10 situations, in which a speaker addressed another person either politely (i.e., using normative language) or less politely (i.e., using colloquial language), depending on the version of the questionnaire. For example, “Natalie is telling Lisa that she is going to drive (give a lift to) a friend to the train station.” On a sketch showing the location of the speaker, participants marked the location of the addressee. Eight of the 10 items were similar to those in Study 3. In the additional items, a speaker said that he was trying very hard to understand a scientific article, and a speaker said that he was taking care of his sister's cat in her absence. These additional items were pretested in the same way as in Study 3. Versions and counterbalancing were also similar to Study 3. In the main experiment, each participant completed one version of the questionnaire, which included all 10 items: five colloquially phrased and five normatively phrased.

Results

We measured spatial distances in centimeters between the speaker and the addressee and then calculated, for each participant, the spatial distances on normative items and on colloquial items by averaging normalized distances across items. As predicted, spatial distances were shorter for colloquially phrased statements ($M = -0.06$, $SD = 0.7$) than for normatively phrased statements ($M = 0.06$, $SD = 0.8$), $t(53) = -2.1$, $p < .05$, suggesting that people who address each other more politely are expected by observers to maintain larger spatial distance between them.

Study 8: The Effect of Politeness on Spatial Distance Preferences

Would making participants address another person in a polite versus less polite way affect the spatial distance they choose to maintain from the addressee? Study 8 examined this question.

Method

Participants—Forty-one Tel-Aviv University students (23 men, 18 women) participated in the study in exchange for 20 New Israeli Shekels (at the time of the study, about $5) for 20 min of participation (ages 18–32 years, $M = 23.4$). Participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions and completed the questionnaire individually.

Procedure—Participants were invited to take part in a getting acquainted study. Participants first completed a preliminary questionnaire on their personal interests and preferences. They were then told that they would meet a fellow participant and have an introductory conversation with him or her on the basis of the information they exchanged via the questionnaires. Participants were asked to present the study to the other participant

by reading to him or her either a polite (formal) or a less polite (colloquial) version of a pre-prepared text.

In the formal condition, participants read

> Good morning/afternoon. My name is _ (first and last name). Please let me describe the study, as I was asked by the experimenter. First, I hope you would not mind completing a questionnaire on your attitudes and preferences in different domains. I completed the same questionnaire for us to familiarize ourselves with each other before the conversation begins. When we start our conversation, I will be the first one to ask questions. I would appreciate if you let me know if you are bothered by the questions I ask.

In the colloquial condition, participants read

> Hi. My name is _ (just first name). The experimenter asked me to say a few words about the study. Hope its okay with you to complete a questionnaire about the things you like. I filled out the same questionnaire, too, so we can have a look at each others' question-naires and get a clue before we start talking. When we start, I will ask first. If I ask something you don't like, just let me know.

These texts were pretested for politeness. In a pretest, 40 participants from Tel-Aviv University rated the politeness of phrases from these texts on a scale ranging from 1 (*colloquial*) to 7 (*formal*). The ratings of the phrases that were used in the colloquial version of the text was lower ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 0.99$) than the ratings of the phrases that were included in the polite version ($M = 5.77$, $SD = 0.86$) $t(39) = -3.69$, $p < .001$.

After reading the text, participants indicated their preference regarding the spatial arrangement of the upcoming conversation by marking the location they prefer on a chart on which the location of the other participant was indicated by an *X*. The distance in centimeters between the marks served as the dependent measure in our study. After completing the spatial distance measure, participants were debriefed, thanked, and paid. The conversation did not actually take place.

Results

As predicted, participants chose to maintain larger spatial distance with the addressee to whom they read the more polite message ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.72$) than with the addressee to whom they read the less polite message ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.50$), $t(40) = 2.13$, $p < .05$. These results suggest that experimentally assigned politeness affects the spatial distance a speaker chooses to maintain from an addressee.

In sum, Studies 5–8 provide converging evidence for the hypothesized effect of politeness on level of construal, temporal distance, and spatial distance. We believe that this is the case because more polite utterances convey (or create) a sense of greater social distance, which, in turn, brings to mind more distant times and places and elicits higher levels of construal.

General Discussion

The theory of politeness (P. Brown & Levinson, 1987) views politeness as a signifier and producer of social distance. CLT (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007; Trope & Liberman, 2003) views social distance as a specific case of psychological distance and as such expects it to be related to level of construal and to other distances. Applying CLT to the theory of politeness, we predicted that greater politeness would be associated with higher level construals and with greater temporal and spatial distance. Eight studies tested this prediction.

We found that participants were more polite when they addressed a person they construed in terms of abstract goals and dispositions rather than concrete means and situations (Study 1), when they expected the target to receive the message in the relatively distant future (Studies 2a and 2b), when they referred to a relatively distant future action (Study 3), and when they addressed individuals in relatively distant locations (Studies 4). Examining the opposite direction of influence, we found that a request to generate polite statements prompted participants to use abstract verbs (Study 5). We also found that polite utterances were judged as pertaining to the relatively distant future (Study 6) and were judged as directed to addressees in relatively remote locations (Study 7). Finally, when instructed to use polite language in addressing another person, participants preferred a relatively large spatial distance from that person (Study 8). Together, these studies lend convergent evidence in support of the predicted association between politeness and level of construal, spatial distance, and temporal distance.

CLT and the Theory of Politeness

The present research is based on P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, according to which politeness is determined by the social distance between the interlocutors, their relative power, and the level of imposition implied by the request (see also Holtgraves, 2002). The present findings provide further support for this theory by showing that social distance is closely associated with politeness. The findings also extend this theory by specifying a new array of variables that might affect politeness. According to CLT, these variables operate via social distance and as such do not add novel theoretical variables to the original model. In our studies, we verified that power differences and the extent of imposition were kept constant by either the task design or pretesting, thereby ensuring that changes in politeness can be solely attributed to the perceived or intended variations in social distance. We believe that the phenomena uncovered in the present studies and their interpretation within the framework of CLT are informative for the theory of politeness.

We believe, for example, that CLT helps to shed light on why different languages and cultures seem to signify politeness in similar ways. CLT predicts that politeness is signified by increased distances and by higher level of construal. For example, standing very close to an interlocutor is generally considered to be less polite than standing farther away (i.e., greater spatial distance is associated with more politeness). Also, tense shifts in verbal communication tend to affect politeness, with the use of present tense being less polite than past or future tenses (i.e., greater temporal distance is associated with more politeness; P. Brown & Levinson, 1987). Likewise, requests and remarks are considered more polite when presented in a more indirect, abstract form, rather than a direct, concrete form (i.e., higher construal is associated with greater politeness).

These examples show that greater politeness may be achieved in social relations and communication when they entail greater spatial or temporal distancing and abstraction. This is neither a coincidence nor an arbitrary convention but rather an expression of an underlying regularity wherein politeness, as a regulator of social distance, is expressed by a high level of construal and greater distance on various dimensions. Of course, different cultures might use different distance and construal cues to convey politeness (e.g., the use of plural as a polite way of addressing a person does not exist in many languages). However, CLT predicts that such cues will always use higher level construals and greater distances to communicate greater politeness, rather than less politeness. This prediction awaits empirical cross-cultural examination.

Psychological Distance and Level of Construal

CLT assumes that psychological distance elicits abstract construals because such construals serve to guide our responses to situations about which we usually have relatively little information. This assumption, when applied to social distance, has interesting implications regarding the role of politeness. Specifically, according to CLT, social distance elicits abstract construals because they enable us to predict, evaluate, and interact with people who do not necessarily share our perspective. Broad trait concepts, superordinate goals, and group stereotypes are examples of the abstract, decontextualized construals that serve to guide our responses to people who are unfamiliar or even complete strangers to us. Moreover, because socially distant interlocutors do not share our perspective on stimuli, the use of relatively abstract, decontextualized language may enable us to transcend our point of view and engage in effective referential communication with them. It is possible, then, that the use of abstract language by polite interactants enables them to signify and regulate interpersonal distance because abstraction is ordinarily used to think about and communicate to socially distant and unfamiliar targets. When we use abstract language in talking politely to another person, we may implicitly say “I don't know you very well” and thus foster a sense of distance from that person. Because spatial distance and temporal distance from an object are also associated with unfamiliarity with the object, spatial and temporal distance cues are likely to be incorporated into polite behavior to signify and create a sense of social distance.

Associations Among Distance Dimensions

The present research also speaks to the more general issue of psychological distance. As noted earlier, CLT assumes that different distance dimensions are interrelated because they all involve moving away from one's own direct experience (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). Consistent with this assumption, Bar-Anan et al. (2007) showed, using a Stroop task, that psychological distance is a common aspect of meaning of spatial distance, temporal distance, and social distance and that this aspect of meaning is assessed automatically. In their studies, participants classified the spatial distance (spatially far vs. near) of words that denoted temporal distance or proximity (e.g., “year” vs. “tomorrow”) and of words that denoted social distance or proximity (e.g., “them” vs. “us”). Participants were faster to classify distance-congruent stimuli (e.g., the word “year” when it appeared spatially distant and the word “tomorrow” when it appeared spatially near) than distance-incongruent stimuli. Similar results were found when the task was to discriminate the words according to their meaning.

Like the studies of Bar-Anan et al., (2007), the present studies show the interrelatedness of distance dimensions. The present demonstration, however, differs in several important respects from that of Bar-Anan et al. (2007). One obvious difference is that Bar-Anan et al. (2007) focused on spatial distance, whereas the present research focused on social distance as reflected in politeness. Perhaps more important, in the present studies, distancing a stimulus on one dimension made it seem more distant on another dimensions. For example, moving an anticipated interaction further into the future produced a perception of more social distance. In contrast, Bar-Anan et al.'s studies are silent on the question of whether a word denoting temporal distance (e.g., “year”) is perceived as more spatially distal than a word denoting temporal proximity (e.g., “tomorrow”). Rather, those studies only suggested that both spatial distance and temporal distance map on a common underlying dimension of psychological distance. The present studies go beyond the Bar-Anan et al.'s studies in showing that distances not only interfere with each other (or facilitate each other's perception) but may actually affect each other.

A promising direction for future research would be to examine other social and cognitive implications of the idea that distance dimensions are associated with each other. For example, it would be interesting to examine whether, in producing and understanding narratives, distance-congruent combinations are more natural than distance-incongruent combinations. Does “a long time ago, far, far away” sound more natural than “a long time ago, in this neighborhood”?

Conclusion

Eight studies showed that politeness is associated with high-level construal, temporal distance, and spatial distance. These findings are consistent with both P. Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness, according to which politeness signifies and regulates social distance, and CLT, according to which social distance is related to level of construal and to other dimensions of psychological distance. We believe that these results shed light on the way politeness is conveyed in different languages and uncover an array of variables that affect and are affected by politeness. The present findings also support CLT's contention that different dimensions of psychological distance are interrelated.

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Table 1

Mean Politeness of Addressing a Person in a Situation by the Situations' Levels of Construal (Study 1)

	Low level of construal		High level of construal	
Action	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
	How construal of action		Why construal of action	
Hurrying to a class	4.2	1.4	4.8	1.0
Looking for a book in the library	4.5	1.3	4.8	0.9
Buying lunch in the cafeteria	3.6	1.2	4.5	1.1
Buying groceries	4.9	1.3	5.1	1.0
Ordering a book in the library	4.9	1.1	5.1	1.0
Scheduling courses	4.2	1.1	4.5	1.0
	Situational attribution		Dispositional attribution	
Speaking loudly on a cell phone	4.4	1.5	5.1	1.3
Inviting classmates to a party	3.5	1.8	3.9	0.9
Smoking	4.6	1.0	5.0	1.3
Reading a book on Tibet	4.0	1.5	4.6	1.2
Feeding a stray cat	4.2	1.2	4.6	0.9
Explaining a class assignment	4.2	1.3	4.5	0.8

Note. The politeness scale ranged from 1 *(not especially polite, informal)* to 7 *(very polite, very formal).*

Table 2

Mean Politeness of Instructions by Temporal Distance of the Addressee's Receiving the Message (Study 2a)

	Low temporal distance (*n* = 20)		High temporal distance (*n* = 20)	
Instructions	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
How to do well in a course	3.1	1.3	3.9	1.3
How to get to the library	3.5	1.3	4.0	1.1
How to prepare for the SAT	2.8	1.0	3.7	1.0
What places to visit in Tel Aviv	3.5	1.7	3.9	0.8
How to behave in a psychology experiment	3.1	1.5	3.5	1.1

Note. The politeness scale ranged from 1 *(not especially polite, informal)* to 7 *(very polite, very formal).*

Table 3

Proportion of Participants Preferring a Polite (Normative) to an Impolite (Colloquial) Phrase by Temporal Distance (Study 3)

Normative (colloquial) phrase	Near future	Distant future
Driving (giving a lift to) a friend	.2	.7
Telling another student to stop bothering you (getting off you) with questions	2	.4
Saving (putting aside) money	.5	.7
Enjoying (having fun) on a vacation	.5	.7
Spending (fiddling away) money	.8	.8
Highlighting (marking) key phrases	.3	.4
Calling (giving a call to) a friend	.6	.7
Being left (getting stuck) home	.1	.1

Table 4

Mean Number of Verbs in a Communication, by Verb Type and Level of Politeness (Study 5)

	Verb category (*N* = 31)					
	Descriptive action verb		Interpretive action verb		State verb	
Level of politeness	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
High	.84	.19	.55	22	1.19	31
Medium	.79	.20	.33	.18	.88	.28
Low	.99	.32	.23	.18	.21	.21

Note. Descriptive action verbs (e.g., *put, take)* are the most concrete, interpretative action verbs (e.g., *help, promise)* are of intermediate abstraction, and state verbs (e.g., *know, like)* are the most abstract category participants used in this study. Adjectives, which comprise the most abstract category in the linguistic categorization model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988), were not used in this study.

Table 5

Mean Abstractness of Verbs by Level of Politeness (Study 5)

	Content of requests											
	Asking for notes		Change money		Turn off air conditioning		Leave a message		Asking to be quiet		Overall	
Level of politeness	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	***M***	***SD***
High	2.04	0.25	2.03	0.13	2.01	0.35	2.41	0.24	2.16	0.27	2.12	0.13
Medium	2.03	0.41	2.02	0.22	1.68	0.47	2.19	0.46	2.1	0.43	2.01	0.25
Low	1.18	0.35	1.38	0.54	1.22	0.42	1.56	0.53	1.49	0.43	1.37	0.22

Note. The abstractness scale ranged from 1 *(low abstractness)* to 4 *(high abstractness).* Abstractness score was computed by assigning the value 1 for descriptive action verbs, 2 for interpretive action verbs and 3 for state verbs and averaging these scores across all the verbs on each level of politeness.