# (In)directness – Distance or Proximity?[1]

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**Abstract**
The terms distance and proximity are not only linked to nonverbal space but also to verbal (in)directness and politeness theories. In this article, I examine what linguistic and rhetorical devices are used to express distance or proximity in social interactions, and why some are better equipped to signal one or the other. Further, these theories are compared to Norwegian and Japanese language and values. Whereas vertical distance is especially important in directing Japanese politeness, Norwegians' limited use of politeness devices may be unintentionally interpreted as impolite, but could also be understood as a sign of respect for personal space.

## 1. Introduction

The cultural anthropologist Edward T. Hall, who is considered the founding father of the field of intercultural communication, was also, to my knowledge, the first who coined the term *proximity* to human communication. In his seminal work on how proxemics is reflected in nonverbal communication from 1966, he separates his theory into two overarching categories: Personal space and territory. *Personal space* describes the immediate space surrounding a person, for instance, how far a speaker is standing from the hearer during a conversation. *Territory* refers to the area which a person may lay claim to and defend against others, such as for instance, what a person communicates when he puts up a garden hedge around his property.

This article will not be about nonverbal communication however, but about how distance and proximity is reflected in verbal, and more specifically, indirect communication. An interesting question, though, is whether there is any connection between nonverbal space as described above and space created by speech. In search of such a connection, I will begin by referring to studies conducted by the cultural psychologists Stephan/Liberman/Trope (2010) who combine theories from psychology with the politeness theories of Brown and Levinson (1987).

Through eight studies they tested their prediction that politeness is linked to spatial, temporal, and social distance.

Concerning spatial distance, they found in one study that people speaking in a polite language stood further apart from the hearer than when they spoke in a colloquial language. Another study showed that when the target person of a written text was unknown or spatially distant, such as for instance an unknown student in another building, the degree of formality or politeness in that text increased.

Concerning temporal distance, that is, verbal tense in this case, they found that past tense such as for instance 'could you open the door' was perceived as more polite than 'can you open the door' uttered in present tense. I will return to this later.

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[1] This article is based on the compulsory trial lecture in connection with the defense of my doctoral thesis (June 2012).

In their so called *construal level theory*, they describe the relation between psychological distance and the extent to which people's thinking about objects and events is abstract or concrete. In a study concerning social distance, they found that when people were asked what they would say in a situation that they perceived as somewhat abstract, they used more abstract linguistic forms such as generic pronouns instead of first person pronouns, that is, forms that Brown/Levinson link to negative politeness, than when they were asked to talk about a situation they perceived as very concrete. This is also something I return to later.

According to Held (2005: 131), indirectness is almost exclusively anchored in politeness. When Stephan/Liberman/Trope talk about politeness, it is what I will later refer to as *negative politeness*, which is indirect communication aiming to avoid imposition. I find Stephan/Liberman/Trope's studies interesting because they so vividly illustrate that politeness has to do with space. In their view, that space is distance. However, I will argue that the space created by politeness also could mean proximity.

## 2. Social distance

The first part of this article will go further into the concept of social distance. To put it simple, when communicating with each other, people are caught in what Tannen (2005) calls a *double bind*, referring to a concept developed by Gregory Bateson:

> In talking to each other, people are caught in a 'double bind' – a situation […] in which a person must obey two conflicting commands and cannot just leave the situation. Obeying one means disobeying the other. In communication, these two commands are the need to be connected to other people and the need to be independent (Tannen 2005: 4)

As long as we believe that others have these same two basic needs, every communicative situation requires us to make a choice between encouraging proximity or to signal distance. What Tannen called the opposition between the need to be connected to other people versus the need to be independent, Brown and Levinson (1987) call *positive* versus *negative politeness*. Negative politeness is "oriented toward the negative face of the hearer by demonstrating distance and avoiding intruding on hearer's territory by not assuming that the hearer should comply to the speaker's needs" (ibid: 143). On the other hand, positive politeness is explained as utterances that "are used as a kind of metaphorical extension of intimacy, to imply common ground or sharing of wants to a limited extent even between strangers who perceive themselves, for the purpose of the interaction, as somewhat similar" (ibid: 103). Thus, the communicators do not have to be actual family or close friends, but need to be interested in attaining a similar sense of closeness.

I will illustrate positive and negative politeness with the aid of a typical positive politeness device, a personal story including an anecdote:

> Asta, a friend from Iceland, attended a course for people from the Nordic countries held somewhere in the north of Norway. The Swedish course leader wanted to illustrate the difference between people from Sweden and Iceland, the way she had experienced it. She started by saying: "Icelanders, they don't know what politeness is". And she told the following anecdote. Imagine that there are people who have attended the same course but don't really know each other. The course is held at the outskirts of a town. Then, two or three of the course participants are waiting outside for a taxi they have ordered to take them back to town when they see another course member who looks like he does not quite know how to get back. So, they tell him "*vi skal til byen, kommer du med*?" 'We are going to town, are you coming with us?' "Well, I'm not quite sure", the man says. Whereupon the Icelanders reply: "*Selvfølgelig blir du bare med*" 'of course you are coming with us'. Then, imagine that the same situation would occur among Swedes. Those who have ordered the taxi address the man standing alone with something in line with:

"Well, we are going to town". "I see," the man replies. "We have ordered a taxi," the group say. "Oh, I see." "There is room in the taxi." "Is that so?" "Maybe you would like to come too?" "Yes, maybe I should", and so on. After finishing the anecdote, the Swedish teacher makes the following final comment: "The Icelanders don't know what politeness is, but at least they care about people".

In Brown/Levinson's view, both Icelanders and Swedes know politeness. The Icelanders apply positive politeness which includes the hearer into their in-group. The Swedes use negative politeness which shows respect for the hearer's autonomy. Maybe the Icelanders communicative style sounds 'direct', as it, in a way, invades the hearer's space more than the Swedish style does. However, directness in linguistics is defined in terms of Grice's (1975) *Cooperative Principle*, which aims to ensure maximum clarity giving neither less nor more information than required. The focus is on getting the message across, with little concern for the social aspects. Positive politeness, on the other hand, might feel like an imposition, but as the term '*positive **politeness**' suggests, it is more occupied with relational concerns than with the message content.

Stephan/Liberman/Trope (2010) understand politeness only as negative politeness. Brown/Levinson (ibid.: 245) believe that the reason why we so often think of politeness as distance, might be due to the fact that so much research has been conducted in the Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere, a culture where weakening the illocutionary force is seen as more socially appropriate and important than boosting it. If we look at conventional politeness in English such as 'would you mind opening the door', for instance, we see that most of the expressions are meant not to intrude but to reassure the hearer of his membership in the group.

Robin Lakoff (1973, 1979, and 1990) employs another set of terms to Brown/Levinson, namely *distance* and *deference* instead of negative politeness and *camaraderie* instead of positive politeness. Tannen (2005), who builds on her work, calls the latter 'to build rapport'. A way to understand this figure from Lakoff (1979: 62) is that strategies to signal distance are used more when the speaker is unfamiliar with the hearer, and that strategies to signal proximity are applied more to situations where the hearer is familiar:

| Clarity → Distance → Deference → Camaraderie |
|---|
| Least relationship                          Most relationship |
| between participants                        between participants |

*Fig. 1: Pragmatic Competence from message to relationshiporiented (Lakoff 1979: 62)*

In addition to this horizontal social distance between degree of familiarity, there exist, according to Brown/Levinson (ibid: 74), also a vertical distance. That is, regardless of degree of familiarity, one might use negative politeness to an elder or superior, and positive politeness to a younger or inferior.

Thus, Brown/Levinson (1987: 74) argue that how serious a face threat is perceived depends on the following factors:

(i)     the social distance between the speaker and the addressee (D)
(ii)    the relative power of the addressee over the speaker (P)
(iii)the degree of imposition of the to-be-performed act (R)

D relates to a symmetric relation where the only variable is horizontal social distance as elaborated on above. P, on the other hand, is about asymmetric relations related to vertical social distance. Thus, Brown/Levinson's factors above means that speakers use more polite language when addressing individuals with high status than individuals with equal or low status, when asking for a big favour than a small favour, and when addressing strangers than familiar people. Thus, politeness increases with request size, higher status of the addressee, and social distance.

## 3. Linguistic and rhetorical devices best equipped to enhance proximity or distance

As mentioned before, Grice's *Cooperative Principle* aims to ensure maximum clarity giving neither too little nor too much information than what is required. There are basically two ways to flout Grice's maxims, either to weaken or to strengthen the illocutionary force of the proposition. Holmes (1984) uses the terms *attenuating* (*weakening*) versus *boosting* (*empathizing*) and Brown/Levinson (1987: 104) refer to the latter as *intensifying modifiers* or *strengtheners*.

Positive politeness strategies are performed by adding linguistic and rhetorical devices that strengthen the illocutionary force. For instance, by adding an intensifier such as 'really' to "you're beautiful today", that is, "you're really beautiful today", the speaker does not only strengthen the force of the item 'beautiful', but also adds a social meaning in that it may be interpreted as an expression of friendliness toward the hearer.

Negative politeness strategies, on the other hand, are performed by adding linguistic and rhetorical devices that weaken the illocutionary force. A weakening device does not only weaken the force of the other lexical items in the utterance, but also may reduce the anticipated negative effect of the speech act. For example, the clause 'a bit' in a statement such as "I'll be a bit late" does not only state the degree of delay, but also may aim to reduce the criticism from the hearer compared to if one said "I'll be late".

In what follows, I will discuss why certain linguistic or rhetorical devices are better equipped to enhance proximity and why others are better equipped to signal distance.

In the beginning of this lecture, I referred to Stephan/Liberman/Trope (2010) who described the first person pronoun as, in their term, 'concrete' in meaning of psychological proximity. In the following I would like to elaborate on this further by employing the term *deixis* as described by Fillmore (1971). The way I understand the concept of *deixis*, it has to do with how a lexeme is understood in context, included space and time. As deictic expressions are frequently egocentric, the centre often consists of the speaker at the time and place of the utterance, and additionally, the place in the discourse and relevant social factors. For instance, when a speaker states "it is here", the item 'here' refers to a place close to the speaker. Brown/Levinson (ibid: 118) build on Fillmore's theories by suggesting that since positive politeness aim for closeness, the linguistic devices used in positive politeness have their deictic centre close to the speaker, the hearer, or both. Thus, when the speaker frequently refers to himself by the first person pronoun 'I', it is because he aims to show personal involvement. Chafe (1982), Tannen (1996) and Ong (2003) also find that the first person

pronoun is used more in oral than in written communication, as the temporal distance in oral communication is closer in time, and because, in the words of Ong (2003: 45): "Writing separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing".

In what follows, I will look at some other typical positive politeness devices in relation to how they function to draw the hearer closer to the deictic centre. The first one is personal narratives, that is, texts that frequently start with "the other day" or "once I experienced that". Tannen (1996: 104) holds that storytelling is a "key element in the establishment of interpersonal involvement in conversation" and that it builds on a sense of identification between the speaker and the hearer. What this means, is that the speaker wishes to draw the hearer into the story to the point that the hearer himself can picture it as if he experienced it himself. You might notice the spatial metaphor in the expression to 'be drawn into'.

Further, when it comes to tag-questions (e.g. 'isn't it?') or in-group language such as a common dialect, sociolect, language, or sense of humour, it is not at all difficult to see that they function similarly to draw the hearer closer to the speaker or closer to the story. Verbosity, exaggerations, direct quotes, and vivid present added to the story, enhance the creation of associations and images in the hearer's mind even further. *Vivid present* means that in a story told in past tense, the speaker suddenly changes to the present tense. The following story was told by a Norwegian businessman stationed in Tokyo and is the answer to whether he thinks the Japanese are good at improvising. The transfer from past to present tense and the many direct quotes are marked in bold.

> <N20> 'I and a Dane who was consultant for Norwegian pelagic industries, were going to Osaka on the *Shinkansen*[2] and had a translator with us, and there was suicide on the *Shinkansen* so there were delays, and thousands of people then who, were affected by it, erm, and then we waited there for an hour and wasted (our) time at Tokyo station and then we were afraid of being late and had started to be a bit stressed we he and I, and then the trains [*jo* (discourse marker)] started going again, many of them to Osaka <interrupted by the phone>. Then then then the trains **starts** going again, and many are going to Osaka, and of course thousands of people have found something better to do and have skipped their train reservations of course, but when the trains start to move again the Dane and I are standing there saying **what the hell here is a train for Osaka it is not ours**, she says **no I understand that** I say **obviously now the trains [*jo*] start to move after an hour delay and then our train will be number ten for example, but the fact is [*jo*] we have a meeting and here the trains start to leave for Osaka, can't we then we just jump on one you know, that must be possible after all they [*jo*] are going to Osaka it says [*jo*] says [*jo*] there bound for Osaka yes but it isn't ours** […]' </N20>

By imagining how the story would have appeared without the vivid present, the direct quotes, repetitions, and verbosity such as exaggerations (e.g. "thousands of people"), lexical intensifiers (e.g. "what the hell"), or the discourse marker '*jo*', which here seems to have an intensifying function, one might better understand how these devices strengthen the intensity and the involvement in the story.

Vivid present has yet another interesting element. Stephan/Liberman/Trope found that informants experienced present tense as more concrete, that is, psychologically closer to them, than the past tense. If we relate this to the deictic centre, present tense is closer to the time of speaking than past tense. Thus, in many languages, the past tense is used more as a negative politeness device. This is an example from Leech (1983: 108):

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[2] *Shinkansen* is the name of the Japanese bullet train.

| | | less indirect | less polite |
|---|---|---|---|
| a) | Answer the phone | | |
| b) | I want you to answer the phone | | |
| c) | Will you answer the phone? | | |
| d) | Can you answer the phone? | | |
| e) | Would you mind answering the phone? | | |
| f) | Could you possibly answer the phone? | more indirect | more polite |

*Fig. 2: (In)directness (from Leech 1983: 108)*

We see here that e) with the verb 'would' and f) with the verb 'could', both in the past tense, are considered more polite. When people choose to ask a request using a past tense instead of present tense, Brown/Levinson (ibid: 204) write: "As the tense is switched from present to past, the speaker moves as if into the future, so he distances himself from the here and now."

I now turn to negative politeness devices. One of the most typical negative politeness devices is called *hedge (e.g.* 'a bit', 'maybe'), and is a vivid image about distancing. In the following I will look at some typical negative politeness devices in relation to how they function to distance the speaker, the hearer, or both from the deictic centre. Here I would like to use Lakoff's terms and divide negative politeness between the strategies called *distance* versus *deference*.

When people employ a distance strategy, they do not say more than they have to, and try to do so as objectively, factually, and formally as possible. This might sound like 'directness' in that the utterance is probably short and to the point, but in Lakoff's own words, when someone chooses to apply a distance strategy, "participants will thread on each other's toes as little as possible, and therefore (unlike when they are direct), assumes each has toes to be trodden on" (Lakoff 1979: 64).

Every device mentioned before such as personal and colourful stories, colloquial language, and direct reference to the speaker or the hearer, is avoided. Instead, distance is extended by exchanging first and second pronouns with impersonal pronouns such as generic pronouns, the second person pronoun 'you' with a generic reference (e.g. 'so generally you might say that') or an authorial 'we' frequently used in academic work. People are addressed by last names instead of their first names, uncomfortable topics are avoided, correct grammar is used instead of personally coloured colloquial language, passive tense, where the agent is not the speaker, is preferred to active tense, and so on. Distance strategies are often likened to a written text, which Chafe (1982) characterizes as marked by *detachment*, and Brown and Levinson refer to as marked by *impersonalisation*. Both terms give connotations of movement away from the deictic centre, that is, away from the speaker and his overt involvement in the text.

Whereas *distance'* main function is not to impose, *deference* tries to minimize imposition through hedges, apologies, and so on. I will give an example from my transcribed material to illustrate a typical deference utterance:

The narrative I referred to above about the *Shinkansen* delay was the answer to a question about whether Japanese like to improvise. The majority of the Norwegians answered briefly:

"*de liker ikke å improvisere*" 'they do not like to improvise' to this question. However, the following Norwegian cautiously comments:

> <N01> nei jeg har i hvert fall, sjelden, det kan jo hende at de erm, de kan være litt fleksible de er ikke, definitivt ufleksible altså, bestandig, det finnes unntak der men det, jevnt over så liker de ikke å improvisere. </N01>
>
> 'no at least I have, rarely, it could be that they are erm, they can be a bit flexible they are not, definitely not in-flexible [discourse marker], always, there are exceptions there but [that], on the whole they do not like to improvise.'

By using disclaimers, repairs, and hedges the speaker distance himself from the proposition and minimizes the possible imposition on the hearer.

In this first part of the lecture, I have looked at how proximity is expressed through positive politeness devices, and how distance is expressed through negative politeness devices. Brown and Levinson's book is titled '*Politeness – some **universals** in language use*'. Thus, as a point of departure, it should be possible to compare these theories to the Japanese and the Norwegian language, and is what I will do next.

## 4 Japanese and Norwegian distance

First, this may seem as a very strong statement, but except for my own work (Rygg 2012), I have yet to come across a study on Japanese or Norwegian communicative styles that even vaguely suggest that positive politeness plays a function in those styles. Seen from an Anglo-American point of view, Lakoff (1979: 69) argues that "the Japanese are 'deferential', i.e. employ the rule of *deference* more than a male in our culture would, and the Germans are 'arrogant', meaning more or less that they use *distance* more than we would." In my study (Rygg ibid: 244ff), I found some evidence that Norwegians too, if not all, similarly to the Germans, use distance strategies. Thus, I will take the assumption that both Norwegians and Japanese aim for independence, whether it is the independence of the speaker, the hearer, or both, as a starting point when I discuss Norwegian and Japanese politeness.

Secondly, the common perception about the Japanese found in literature such as for instance Hall/Hall (1987) or Nishiyama (2000) is that the Japanese are so polite that you never know what they really mean because the message is covered in all the devices known to negative politeness. Further, there is a tendency to portray them, in an essentialist manner, as bound by these conventional rules of politeness. On the other hand, a book containing contributions from scholars from several countries about Norwegian politeness has the title '*Typical Norwegian to be impolite*', a statement that, luckily for us Norwegians, is followed by a question mark. In what follows, I discuss these claims in relation to horizontal and vertical distance.

Japanese linguists' traditional approach to politeness is centred on *keigo* (Usami 2004: 6), which literally means 'respect language' but is often referred to as a honorific speech level in English. In want of time, I will concentrate my discussion of horizontal and vertical distance here on *keigo*. According to Haugh and Obana (2011), the ideological foundation behind honorifics is believed to be Confucian values about the importance of knowing one's place in a hierarchical society. In daily life, a Japanese speaker juggles between three degrees of formality; plain, formal and honorific. The debate in Japan since Brown/Levinson published their work on negative face has been, on the one side, that since *keigo* are lexical manifestations of deference, communicative interactions are not about choosing a strategy.

Rather, people, who are governed by the rules of appropriate behaviour in a given situation, must simply know the right speech level for the right occasion. Newer research on honorifics, however, questions this. For instance, Pizziconi (2011) demonstrates how people can manipulate *keigo*. The plain form is normally reserved for family and close friends where there is less concern about relative positions. Thus, one might say that the plain form signals proximity. Husband a wife would normally use plain form when talking to each other. However, if a wife suddenly changes to honorifics, it might be because she is angry with her husband, and wants to signal that feeling through distance. In another example, Haugh/Obana (2011) report on a conversation between a foreign student of Japanese and her teacher, where the student, aiming to show friendliness, addresses her teacher in plain form. The teacher however, answers her quite stiffly in formal form, as to signal that she has stepped outside her position. As an inferior, it is not up to her to advance their degree of closeness. What would instead have made the teacher feel that he had to do with a friendly student was if she had addressed him in a formal or honorific form to show that she recognized that the teacher has a higher position than herself. Thus, the other on-going discussion in Japan in relation to Brown and Levinson's negative politeness theories, as was first advocated by Matsumoto (1988) among others, is about how honorifics is not to create distance, but rather a way to strengthen relationships in a vertical society, that is, to acknowledge one's dependence on others and show that one knows one's proper place. I believe it must be the same reason why I frequently hear my Japanese co-workers addressing each other with a formal and even honorific form. They are more or less the same age and with the same level of education, and thus, their social position is similar, but, based on what is already said about honorifics also having an element of proximity, I anticipate that they use this form to acknowledge each other's work and to encourage each other as professional and proud teachers.

As the discussion above suggests, it is not difficult to find examples of vertical politeness in the Japanese society. The first pronoun, which in English has one form 'I', has at least five in Japanese, depending on the speaker's gender, status relative to the hearer, and the formality of the situation. When I talk about personal pronouns, I would like to draw attention to what I believe is a difference in the proximity/distance function of personal pronouns in Japanese. Japanese is described as a so called *pro-drop* language, meaning a language in which certain classes of pronouns may be omitted when they are in some sense pragmatically and syntactically inferable. Thus, to apply the first person pronoun overtly in Japanese when it is not really required has the same function of involvement that has been mentioned before. However, the lack of first person pronouns does not have the opposite distancing effect. The second person pronoun 'you', the third person pronouns 'he, she', and the first person plural 'they' are normally either left out, or substituted by names or titles. However, to address a close friend with: "is *Tsuma-chan*[3] leaving?" instead of "are you leaving, *Tsuma-chan*?" is so conventional that it does not seem to give any connotations neither of distance nor proximity.

*Keigo* can also signal horizontal politeness, that is, different language used for 'insiders' versus 'outsiders'. For instance, the lexeme *kanai*, which literally means 'at home' is the term used for one's own wife, whereas another person's wife is addressed as *okusan* or *okusama* which starts with a honorific prefix *o* and ends with the honourable title *san* or *sama*. This gives the item 'honorable wife' a double set of honorific markers. Japanese has many such lexemes used for people considered either to be insiders or outsiders.

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[3] '*Tsuma*' is an abbreviation of the surname '*Tsumamoto*'. ～*Chan* is a diminutive suffix; it expresses proximity in that it is used only to females of similar or younger age.

Contrary to in a Japanese speaking community where politeness is guided both by horizontal and vertical distance, I cannot think of any lexemes in modern Norwegian whose only function is to signal the hearer's higher social distance. The last century has seen the loss of linguistic markers of vertical politeness such as the pronoun *De* (*Sie* in German) and titles such as *fru* (*Frau*) and *herr* (*Herr*). A Norwegian historian (Meyer 2001: 4-6) claims that contrary to Sweden and Denmark, Norway has never had an unbridgeable gap between top and bottom in society, and the peasants' condition has been far more egalitarian than in the other two countries. The Norwegian linguist Fretheim (2005: 145), somewhat categorically argues that: "Most of what can be classified as obligatory markers of positive politeness[4] in many other languages ('Sir', 'Madam', addressing people by their title, the traditional V (*vous*)/ T(*tu*) distinction) would be perceived as either comical or a sign of insincerity if transplanted into the Norwegian conversation. What is felt like cajoling is generally resented".

Thus, it seems that linguistically manifested vertical politeness is scares in Norwegian, but does this mean that Norwegians are impolite? In what follows, I suggest that horizontal distance play a more important role in the Norwegian society. In my study (Rygg 2012), I found that the Norwegians who were not guided by *deference* or *camaraderie* strategies, had a style with few of both positive and negative politeness devices. This taciturn style suggests that distance is not first of all signalled by the use of deference, but more by Lakoff's category called *distance*.

The Norwegian anthropologist Gullestad (1989: 116) maintains that the Norwegian culture is predominantly individualistic but that individualism co-exists with a strong collective sense of similarity/equality. This collectivism might be a result of small and isolated communities where people have had to depend on each other. Thus, in a few studies on communication in Norwegian villages (Hollos 1970, 1978; Larsen 1984), this dependence is reflected in *Deference* strategies such as long introductions about the weather, avoiding controversial topics, appearing to agree rather than to disagree, modesty about oneself and one's in-group, hinting by use of hedges and ellipsis, and so on. Within the frame of collectivism, however, and based on fieldwork in different social groups, Gullestad (1992: 184) argues that independence is the key notion of Norwegian individualism, and is connected to the values of self-sufficiency and self-control.

With these and other studies as a base, and by the use of Wierzbicka's (1994) *Cultural Script Model* I arrived at the following hypothesis (Rygg 2012: 249ff):
    Norwegian 'people' think that:
- everyone is the same (Larsen 1984; Gullestad 1989)
- no one should believe themselves better (Sandemose 1933; Larsen 1984)
- people like to manage on their own (Jonassen 1983; Gullestad 1992; Fife 2002)
- one should not be a bother to other people (Fife 2000, 2002).

One might imagine then, that these underlying values lead to the following communicative norms:

    Norwegian 'people' think that a well behaved communicator:
- should say what is on his mind because people are equals

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[4] It seems that Brown/Levinson (1987: 178) define items such as '*Vous*' and titles as negative rather than positive politeness devices.

- **is modest in conversation** because he does not think himself better
- **hesitates to involve others** because people like to manage on their own
- does not display excessive involvement and keeps communication to a minimum because one should not be a bother to other people .

According to Lakoff (1973: 303), directness or what she calls the *Rule of Clarity* can be seen as a subcategory of the politeness rule *Distance – don't impose*. Consequently, in her view, to aim not to impose can be seen as an attempt "to get the message communicated in the shortest time with the least difficulty, that is, to avoid imposition on the addressee by wasting his time with meandering or trivia, or confusing him and making him look bad". Brown/Levinson (1987: 130) agree that: "There is an element in formal politeness that sometimes directs one to minimize the imposition by coming rapidly to the point". This coincides with the Norwegian values of keeping communication to a minimum because that is what a considerate communicator does. I will argue that this is a type of horizontal politeness on the grounds that I believe strangers are imposed on even less than people one knows. In line with this, Røkaas (2000: 117) claims that the Norwegian language has a limited number of conventionalized verbal acknowledgement strategies toward strangers, and for that reason, they might unintentionally come across as aloof or indifferent. Thus, the last part of this article might be seen as an attempt to provide another explanation to this Norwegian communicative style than dispassionateness, indifference, or lack of politeness.

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