

Chapter 6

Power, Space, and Politeness: Why d’Alembert Was Saluted Impolitely

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the rules of politeness (politesse, fr.) in 18th-century France, which are believed to have bridged class divides and enabled rational communication between the nobility and bourgeoisie. As a result of the analysis, the functions these rules served during that period and the underlying power struggles will be revealed, providing a conceptual framework to understand the potential meanings of polite and impolite behaviors in different times, spaces, and contexts, especially for the modern era. The hypotheses of the study are as follows: (1) The rules of politeness, which determine what speech and behavior are considered polite or impolite, and who can perform them, where, and under which circumstances, arise as a result of power inequalities and function to maintain them. (2) Because it determines the content, form, and speaking-subject prior to speech or action, politeness does not liberate or facilitate communication or interaction between individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to talk about politeness, let's first look at the situation of rudeness, the moment of crossing the line, and the events afterwards: A father on TikTok turned the front camera of his phone towards himself, and recorded a video before taking his son to school. It is obvious from the facial expressions of his little son that he is not in a good mood as he gets in the car. This father with a stubbly beard, blue eyes, and a sports tracksuit looks into our eyes from the camera and asks us, the viewers: "Guess who got grounded this morning for a month after he called his mom 'bro'?" This time, we are on Twitch. One of the female streamers of this platform, which is mostly preferred by game streamers, viol3ntvxn_xl (Violent Vixen from Team xL) wrote the following in the caption of her video: "How it feels to unmute my mic and make sure they know they got beat by a dishwashing sandwich maker" (2024). What Violent Vixen sarcastically mentions is a rudeness that many women who play video games experience. When women turn on their microphones to communicate in-game, some male players tell them that FPS (first-person-shooter) games are for men, that she doesn't belong there, and that women should stay home and do the dishes or make sandwiches for their men. We know that a similar rudeness occurred about 250 years ago: mathematician, physicist, and philosopher Jean le Rond d'Alembert was accepted among the French nobility in the second half of the 18th century, and was regularly invited to their salon events, which were held among themselves and where only a few people could attend. One evening, d'Alembert was present at the event that was held at the house of Madame du Deffand, the Marquise of Champrond. A physicist named Fournier, who joined the event later, greeted the lady of the house very politely: "Madam, I have the honor of presenting you my most humble respects." Then he turned and greets Jean-François Henault, the president of the Paris Parliament: "Monsieur, I have the distinct honor of saluting you." And then, to the Antoine de Ferriol de Pont-de-Veyle, the inspector general of the French navy as "Monsieur, I am your most humble servant". When it was time to greet d'Alembert, Fournier said "Hello, Monsieur". D'Alembert was very upset when he was not greeted in the same polite tone. Those who are not used to it may not understand why d'Alembert was upset: the philosopher was greeted in full compliance with the rules of politeness, no lines have been crossed. This is exactly what he is angry about. Since he is not a nobleman, no one is obliged to do it. From contemporary TikTok videos to an 18th-century Parisian salon, these seemingly disparate examples share a common thread: they each illustrate how definitions of politeness and rudeness are shaped by underlying power asymmetries. Whether it is about family relations and responsibilities, gender roles, or the stratified structure of the feudal society, the common feature of the three examples of rudeness we have selected from different places, times, and contexts is that they are based on unequal

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