

Conceptualizations of (im)politeness and (in)directness across German-speaking regions and countries

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In this paper, I analyze conceptualizations of (im)politeness and (in)directness among almost 1000 online survey participants. Allegedly, German speakers from Austria, Germany and Switzerland differ in how they perceive and apply (im)politeness and (in)directness in communication. Stereotypes about communicative behavior refer not only to differences on a national level, e.g. “the polite Swiss” versus “the direct Germans”, but also to regional categories like the “direct Berliner”. Crosslinguistic studies on first-order perspectives – i.e. speakers’ conceptualizations – of (im)politeness and (in)directness, have been contributing to a more nuanced understanding of these phenomena (e.g. Fukushima and Sifianou 2017; Hodeib 2024). However, empirical analyses from diverse cultural contexts remain scarce and there exists no comparative analysis of metapragmatic statements about (im)politeness and (in)directness between and within German-speaking Austria, Germany and Switzerland. With this study, I aim to bridge the empirical research gap by analyzing, firstly, how German-speaking participants describe (im)politeness and (in)directness, and secondly, if there are patterned geographical and/or social differences in their descriptions.

In an online survey, German-speaking participants from Austria, Germany and Switzerland answered three open-ended questions. They were asked in turns to describe in a few written sentences their understanding of a direct person, a polite person and an impolite person. In the subsequent part of the survey, they completed a listing task (e.g. Hough and Ferraris 2010) which is designed to collect common categories for a specific semantic domain. With four separate questions, participants were asked to list “people who are especially direct/indirect/polite/impolite”. All answers were independently coded by two researchers, following an inductively defined

coding guideline. It is planned to complement the manual analysis computationally with semi-automatic conditional topic allocation (e.g. Wekhof 2024). Categories from the listing tasks were analyzed with respect to frequency and cognitive saliency (Sutrop 2001).

Preliminary analysis suggests that politeness was conceptualized along common topics such as “adhering to social norms”. Directness was often described ambivalently as “being honest”, “being blunt” and possibly “harmful” at the same time. Free listing data suggests regional differences in the categories that participants associated with “(in)direct people” and “(im)polite people”. E.g. only participants from Switzerland listed Zurich residents as “direct people”.

Besides offering insights into the cultural contexts of different conceptualizations of (im)politeness and (in)directness in German-speaking Austria, Germany and Switzerland, this study explores innovative methods for experimental discourse analysis by triangulating different types of data and ways of analysis.

References

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