

# A benchmark for politeness

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(Im)politeness is never a depersonalized, decontextualized absolute but always a perception or judgment of appropriate behaviour on a given occasion – what one expects oneself and others to do in a particular social interaction. Nonetheless it is normal for most tabooed words and phrases to be castigated in dictionaries as ‘coarse’, ‘obscene’, ‘insulting’, ‘vulgar’, ‘profane’, ‘taboo’, ‘impolite’ and ‘offensive’, i.e. dysphemistic. The benchmark for such judgements, and more generally for (im)politeness within Anglo communities, is what Allan & Burridge (1991) called the middle class politeness criterion (MCPC). Following a discussion of (im)politeness theories and hypotheses about face management, (cultural) scripts and habitus, the MCPC is closely examined, explained, and tested in the course of examining some texts. The essay concludes with proposals to resolve the apparent limitations of the MCPC.

**Keywords:** appropriate behaviour, cooperativeness, face, habitus, impoliteness, politeness, rapport management, social identity, social interaction

## 1. Introduction

There has been an enormous amount written about politeness and somewhat less about impoliteness (e.g. Lakoff 1973, Ide 1982, Brown & Levinson 1987, Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1989, Fraser 1990, Gu 1990, Allan & Burridge 1991, Sifianou 1992, Watts, Ide & Ehlich (eds) 1992, Mao 1994, Lee-

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Wong 2000, Eelen 2001, Terkourafi 2001, Mills 2003, Watts 2003, Spencer-Oatey 2005, Allan and Burrridge 2006, Haugh 2007, Bousfield 2008, Bousfield & Locher (eds) 2008, Haugh 2010, Culpeper 2011, Terkourafi 2011, 2012). Various attempts have been made to define (im)politeness<sup>1</sup> and to classify and rank what are perceived to be their constituents. What surprises me when reading this literature is that the grounds for counting a language expression polite or impolite are left implicit. Judgments are made based on the researcher's opinion or that reported by an informant, without the grounds being explicitly identified. Allan & Burrridge (1991) suggested a basis for the fact that ordinary people speak and act as if, for instance, *toilet* is orthophemistic, *loo* is euphemistic, and *shithouse* is dysphemistic.

## 2. Theories of (im)politeness

Whether or not writers on politeness accept Grice's cooperative principle (Grice 1975), they all accept that, if communication is to proceed smoothly, interlocutors must cooperate with one another to some extent. Most researchers into politeness accept that a large part of cooperative behaviour can be explained in terms of mutual presentation of face and reactions to it. Erving Goffman (1955: 213) wrote:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself.

Brown & Levinson (1987: 61) describe face as 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself'. They identified a hierarchy of linguistic strategies for dealing with face-threatening acts (FTAs) that they claimed to be universal, for which they are rightly criticised. What does seem universal, though, is that there is in the language of each social group a hierarchy of such strategies, but they may be different in form from those proposed by Brown & Levinson (B&L).

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<sup>1</sup> I use '(im)politeness' to include both impoliteness and politeness. It is true that the positive term is normally used as the hyperonym, but in this essay I prefer to use *politeness* for 'being polite' and *impoliteness* for 'being impolite' for the sake of clarity.

Although lexical meaning and the particular syntactic configurations of items have their part to play in politeness and impoliteness, it is the strategic way that those language expressions are used, i.e. the pragmatics, which is crucial. A question to pose is: What is the basis for the B&L politeness strategies? And the answer must be their intuitions as speakers of English, or theirs and others' intuitions about Tzeltal and Tamil (see B&L 1987).

Speaking to others is a social activity, and like other social activities, the people involved, S[peaker] and H[earer], mutually recognise – as part of their common ground (see Clark 1996, Lee 2001, Stalnaker 2002, Allan 2013a, b) – that certain conventions govern their actions and their use of language, both when speaking and when interpreting the actions and utterances of their interlocutor. Each interlocutor is held responsible for observing or violating the conventions of language interchange. A subset of those conventions involves face-work. Almost any act by S towards H has the potential to be face-threatening, even just uttering a greeting or failing to do so. Normally everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained. For any act, S should minimize the cost to H and maximize the benefit to H. Face is one's 'public self-image' in the sense that it is, for a given social encounter, a person's belief about the way others perceive them acting within that encounter, and it is not necessarily the individual alone but also people he or she may be taken to represent (family, gender, school, team, profession, ideology, etc.). Hence one must not *let the side/family/country/party/... down*.

The B&L concept of face has been condemned for being inapplicable to other cultures such as Japanese (Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1989) and Chinese (Gu 1990, Mao 1994, Lee-Wong 2000); largely because of the need to heed social hierarchy and moral/ethical values in those societies. However, the difference is a matter of emphasis rather than being a qualitative distinction because, to at least some extent in Western (including Anglo) society, public self-image is constituted from a person's place in the social structure (one's social identity), which includes recognition of the face concerns of the undergoer and bystanders. A person's own assessment of their *public image*, i.e. the image they present to others and what others esteem them for, is not simplistically selfish or

individualistic. In order to make sense of what Mao, Matsumoto and others may be referring to, it helps to consider aspects of a person's notion of self or identity:

Psychological theories of identity typically distinguish between personal (individual) and social (group or collective) identities. Individual identity refers to self-definition as a unique individual, whereas collective identity refers to self-definition as a group member. (Spencer-Oatey 2007: 641)

Now it seems to me that what Spencer-Oatey refers to as 'individual identity' is principally involved in the B&L concept of face, whereas the 'collective identity' is principally involved in the Japanese and Chinese concept of face as described by the authors cited. Certainly the notions of politeness favoured by, e.g., Fraser (1990), Escandell-Vidal (1996), Terkourafi (1999), Spencer-Oatey (2000), Eelen (2001), Terkourafi (2001), Escandell-Vidal (2009) allow for a more socially oriented account of politeness than is attributed to B&L.

A focus on social identity (what one thinks of oneself as a person and as a member of family, firm, gender, etc.) together with sociality rights and obligations is an appropriate move away from the focus on individual face-wants. These give rise to what one expects oneself and others to do in social interactions, and they typically form a part of common ground. When expectations are not met, the consequence is a sense of injustice. Any behaviour on the part of another which evokes this sense of injustice has the potential to be judged dysphemistic and impolite.

Politeness, then, is a display of consideration for others (Arndt & Janney 1985, Fraser 1990, Sifianou 1992, Haugh 2004); but there are different conceptions of what is meant by *consideration for others* among different communities. This arises because **(im)politeness is never a depersonalized, decontextualized absolute but always a perception or judgment of appropriate behaviour on a given occasion**, i.e. what one expects oneself and others to do in a particular social interaction. It ties (im)politeness to frames and scripts and to the notion of habitus (Bourdieu 1991, Eelen 2001, Terkourafi 2001, Mills 2003, Watts 2003). Escandell-Vidal (1996, 2009) suggests that these frames and scripts are learned as part of one's socialization as a human being and that it, like language competence, acquisition of politeness scripts degenerates after puberty so that post-pubescent exposure to a new culture renders a non-native-like ability in practice – which

explains why out-groupers often seem impolite. The socialization gives rise to expected behaviours, which are therefore unmarked.

However, what one participant judges appropriate may not be deemed appropriate by another. This discrepancy of perception arises through the personal habitus of each individual (see Watts 2003: 163). Habitus (Bourdieu 1991) is the (collective) disposition that generates practices, perceptions, and attitudes within a social group, acquired (like frames, scripts, and other aspects of socialization) through the activities and experiences of everyday life. Habitus interacts with particular contexts and events to shape the way an individual internalises social structures and appropriate and inappropriate ways to react to them. Although habitus is, like Saussure's 'langue' (Saussure 1931), fundamentally a collective disposition shared with other members of a community, each individual within the community contributes to the habitus and utilizes his or her version of it. Like language, habitus is constantly evolving. Politeness and impoliteness are functions of habitus and they, too, are constantly mutating.

(Im)politeness is wedded to what is spoken of, the participants and bystanders, the place, and the time period.<sup>2</sup> (Im)politeness is not absolute but relative to the occasion (Allan & Burridge 2006, Haugh 2007, Bousfield 2008, Mills 2011), which brings me to the motivation for this essay: certain forms of behaviour and certain language expressions are, nonetheless, regarded as intrinsically (im)polite. I will not discuss forms of behaviour here but will stick closely to language expressions. I begin with the fact that it is normal for most tabooed words and phrases to be branded in dictionaries as dysphemistic (having connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance). For example, *shit* is judged 'coarse' by the *OED* (*Oxford English Dictionary* 1989) and WordNet 3 (Farlex Inc. 2011) which adds the epithets 'obscene' and 'insulting'; it is judged 'vulgar' by the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000), *Merriam-Webster* (online), and Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/-Shit>) which adds 'profane'; the *Collins English Dictionary* (2003) correctly identifies the word as 'taboo'; the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* 2010 identifies it as 'taboo, slang'; and *Kernerman English Multilingual Dictionary* (2010) as 'an impolite or

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<sup>2</sup> There is a lot more evidence for this in Terkourafi 2011 and some more in Allan and Burridge 2006.

offensive word'. These are connotations and therefore pragmatic (see Allan 2007 for elaborated discussion). What is the basis for these judgments? I suggest that the benchmark is the middle class politeness criterion.

### 3. The middle class politeness criterion (MCPC)

The judgments illustrated just above are based on the lexicographer's intuition. Although any one lexicographer will probably check (where possible) on the judgments of earlier lexicographers, where the buck stops is the intuition of that lexicographer. So what is this intuition based on? No rationale is given for any of the ex cathedra value judgments in the dictionaries, nor in media outlets, so Allan & Burrige 1991, 2006 proposed one, called the middle class politeness criterion (MCPC). A slightly updated version is given in (1).

- (1) Among adults, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dispreferred counterpart. The dispreferred counterpart would be a dysphemism.

We see a correlation between dysphemism and impoliteness, whereas both euphemism and orthophemism are typically polite; i.e. X-phemisms are the products of (im)politeness and consequently indicate aspects of (im)politeness. Orthophemisms and euphemisms are words or phrases used as an alternative to a dispreferred (undesirable, inappropriate) expression because they avoid possible loss of face by the speaker and also loss of face by the hearer or some third party. What motivates such feelings is one's socialization within one's local sub-culture as part of a wider culture. One example is that under most circumstances the dispreferred response to an invitation is refusal; dispreferred responses to a greeting are a dismissal or a cold stare. An orthophemism (e.g. *faeces*, *vagina*) is typically more formal and more direct (or literal) than the corresponding more colloquial and figurative euphemism (cf. *poo* and *down there*). A dysphemism is a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance (cf. *shit* and *cunt*). Like euphemism, dysphemism is sometimes motivated by fear and distaste, but also by

hatred and contempt. Speakers resort to dysphemism to talk about people and things that frustrate and annoy them, things and people they disapprove of and wish to disparage, humiliate and degrade. Dysphemistic expressions include curses, name-calling, and any sort of derogatory comment directed towards others in order to insult or wound them. Dysphemism is also a way to let off steam; for example when exclamatory swearwords alleviate frustration or anger (see Allan and Burridge 2009).

The middle class politeness criterion, MCPC, (I discuss what is meant by ‘middle class’ below) is a cognitive frame or cultural script proposed to account for X-phemic language which is the product of what, for now, we can refer to as (im)polite behaviour. It is useful here to include Richard Watts’ notion of *politic behaviour*: “that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the on-going social interaction” (Watts 2003: 20); it is non-salient, whereas, according to Watts, politeness and impoliteness are both salient. I don’t fully agree with Watts in this characterisation of (im)politeness, but the adoption of terms that are frequently judged dysphemistic as effective orthophemisms under certain circumstances can be classed as politic behaviour (cf. the use of *nigger* as a form of address among African-Americans on certain occasions). Politic behaviour is unmarked behaviour that seeks to maintain the social status quo; it is what is expected under Grice’s ‘cooperative principle’ and Fraser’s ‘conversational contract’ (Grice 1975, Fraser 1990). It is in part what underlies B&L’s notion that the norm is to maintain face all round. Typically, use of orthophemism is politic behaviour. So, politic behaviour joins (im)politeness as one of the pragmatic functions of the MCPC.

So, what the MCPC is intended to capture is that to be polite is to act considerately towards others, in particular the undergoer and the people and things (including beliefs) that the undergoer holds dear. To be impolite is to disparage explicitly (or implicitly discount from consideration, e.g. by ignoring) any of these; thus ‘[i]mpoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context’ (Locher & Bousfield 2008: 3). Some standard examples of impolite behaviour include: the use of obfuscating language (often castigated as *jargon*); the use of an inappropriate style (slang, language that is too familiar and colloquial or, on other occasions, too formal); profane swearing (using profane

and/or obscene language); language that insults through lies, insinuation, innuendo, casting aspersions, digs, snide comments, insolence, ridiculing, name-calling; shouting down or threatening.<sup>3</sup> All such dysphemisms are wont to cause harassment, alarm, or distress and be judged *rude* or *hurtful*. People who are impolite are judged rude, coarse, and ill-bred, unmannerly and sometimes just plain nasty; sometimes, when being impolite, they manifest that they are ill-socialized.

I return to the definition for the MCPC in (1), the first sentence of which reads ‘Among adults, in order to be polite to a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex in a formal situation in a middle class environment, one would normally be expected to use the euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dispreferred counterpart’. Why the mention of (a) ‘[a]mong adults’; (b) ‘a casual acquaintance of the opposite sex’; (c) ‘a formal situation’; (d) ‘in a middle class environment’ when politeness is not in fact restricted to just these four conditions, i.e. they are not necessary conditions? The brief answer is that (1) identifies the set of the most probable conditions for politeness. I am certainly not suggesting that the middle class politeness criterion fails to apply between children or between close acquaintances of the same sex or among members of the highest and the lowest socioeconomic class. However, the biological differences between men and women have led to social differences that mostly reflect sexual tension, for example the constraints placed on the display and accessibility of bodies of women of child-bearing age that don’t apply equally to men of the same age nor do the tolerated differences in relative sexual freedom of women and men. These ensure a tension (that seems to be universal) between adult males and females because of their distinct social roles, even when there is no conscious desire present for sex or romance. The need for a certain social distance is greater among casual acquaintances, because there is no established relationship to

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<sup>3</sup> An insult assails the target with contemptuous, perhaps insolent, language intended to wound or disparage. People may be likened to and ascribed behaviour pertaining to animals, body-parts and effluvia connected with sex, micturition, and defecation, sexual perversions, physical and mental abnormalities, character deficiencies, or attacked with –IST dysphemisms. All these are found in both true insults and also ritual insults (banter) among an in-group. See Allan & Burridge 2006, also Culpeper 2011.



encourage over-familiarity and potentially unwelcome banter.<sup>4</sup> These social differences account for conditions (a) and (b). I should add that the ‘adults’ referred to have the characteristics ascribed to the apocryphal *man on the Clapham omnibus* or *the man who takes the magazines at home and in the evening pushes the lawn mower in his shirt sleeves* or *the man in the street* – all of which were intended to refer to very ordinary persons of either sex. By definition, formal situations require participants to hold social roles that are often institutionally defined, usually by convention but occasionally by explicit regulation, which typically prescribe a readily perceptible social distance among participants. Informal situations encourage camaraderie and a colloquial style that is tolerant of less overt politeness. All these situations give rise to what Escandell-Vidal 1996, Terkourafi 1999, 2001, 2012 call ‘cognitive frames’ and I refer to as frames or scripts that an individual habitus has recourse to. Hence (c) is a constraint on (a) and (b).

And (d) limits all of (a), (b), and (c). The phrase ‘middle class environment’ is not intended to constrain actual application of the MCPC in real life to members of the socioeconomic class between upper class and working class (Murray 1824); in (1) it identifies an idealized constraint based on the cultural norms in a particular segment of Anglo society. Why choose the term *middle class*? Well, just as the newly rich gentfolk of the post-Medieval period strove to adopt the manners of the court and nobility, so does what I am here calling the middle class strive to adopt those manners of their social superiors which they approve of. The manners of gentfolk in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries supplied the pattern for proper, and therefore polite, language and behaviour in Britain and its colonies, cf. Campbell 1776, I: 352, Withers 1789: 161, Leonard 1929: 29, Shapin 1994, Culpeper & Demmen 2011. We still describe polite behaviour as *courteous*, the meaning of which is given by the *OED* (1a) as ‘[h]aving such manners as befit the court of a prince; having the bearing of a courtly gentleman in intercourse with others; graciously polite and respectful of the position and feelings of others; kind and complaisant in conduct to others’. Today (and for a several centuries) polite behaviour, including language behaviour, has become a behaviour aspired to by that mass of the community whom I refer to in (1) as ‘middle class’ and a

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<sup>4</sup> Banter can occur between strangers if there is no risk of insulting the addressee, see Allan 2010: 2113 for an example.

part of their habitus. This is the benchmark for Anglo politeness, but it does not follow that if Queen Elizabeth II is polite that she is consciously trying to be middle class, I am sure she is not; and the same is true of other speakers too – including the likes of chef Gordon Ramsey (see <http://www.buzzfeed.com/-mattbellassai/things-only-chef-gordon-ramsay-can-get-away-with>). How far this benchmark, which is based on an idealization,<sup>5</sup> extends beyond Anglo communities, I shall briefly return to in §4; however, as described here it is adherence to a set of social norms that is broadly similar to Japanese *wakimae* defined by Sachiko Ide 1992: 299 as “sets of social norms of appropriate behavior people have to observe in order to be polite in the society [in which] they live. One is polite only if he or she behaves in congruence with the expected norms in a certain situation, in a certain culture and society.”<sup>6</sup>

The MCPC in (1) says that one would normally be expected to use euphemism or orthophemism rather than the dysphemistic dispreferred counterpart. Does this imply an avoidance-based understanding of politeness that renders the MCPC irrelevant to hearer-beneficial acts such as compliments and offers? Certainly not. The MCPC is a conventional means via which individuals interact during language interchange. The default norm is that social interactions are expected to be harmonious, consequently there are social and legal sanctions against disruptive behaviour. These conditions are reflected in the MCPC which identifies a conventional means to build or maintain harmonious relations. Thus, for instance, when a sighted person offers to help an unknown blind woman across a busy street without any expectation that the favour will be returned in kind the action is

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<sup>5</sup> Idealization does not devalue (im)politeness any more than the idealization of the freezing point of water as 0° C is useless because in reality water freezes at a range of temperatures. Zero is the benchmark for the freezing point of water.

<sup>6</sup> One notable difference is that the MCPC is pragmatic whereas *wakimae* is, according to Ide 1989, dependent on socially obligatory grammatical choices of honorifics, etc. and thus not volitional and pragmatic. I doubt this. In Korean, which has a similar system of honorifics to Japanese, Kim 2003: 204 (cited in Brown 2011: 119) claims that wives use non-honorific *panmal* (반말) to husbands 91% of the time in private, 39% of the time in public, and only 1% of the time in front of their parents-in-law – which is indubitably a volitional, pragmatic use of honorifics.

completely compatible with the MCPC, which would inspire the language used in making the offer to be orthophemistic.

## 4. Conclusion

Sentences are not *ipso facto* polite, nor are languages more or less polite. It is only speakers who are polite, and then only if their utterances reflect an adherence to the obligations they carry in that particular conversation. (Fraser 1990: 233)

The ‘obligations’ that Fraser refers to are, for Anglos, those defined in (1). I have discussed (im)politeness in some detail in the course of this essay. One thing I have not done is differentiated two different approaches to politeness (Watts, Ide & Ehlich (eds) 1992, Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Terkourafi 2011, 2012): politeness1, or lay notions of politeness, and politeness2, the object of inquiry in social and linguistic theory that delivers an analytical perspective on politeness1. As Terkourafi (2011) points out, the interesting target of inquiry is politeness1 (perhaps explained via politeness2), and politeness1 is what I assume the MCPC applies to – though the MCPC itself, as described in (1), falls under politeness2. It seems certain that face concerns have consequences for (im)politeness, so I tried to present an account of face that dispenses with objections to the B&L account, emphasizing the importance of social identity rather than individual identity, and thus favouring an account of face-work that is close to Spencer-Oatey’s concept of rapport management (Spencer-Oatey 2000).

(Im)politeness is a set of dispositions that govern social interaction within a social group that render an act undertaken in a particular context appropriate or inappropriate according to the normal standards of behaviour within that group, which serve to establish criteria for assessing (im)politeness. (Im)politeness is therefore a set of conventional behaviours and a manifestation of habitus. Although this has been widely recognized for decades the criteria underlying intuitions about what is polite or impolite, although discussed, remained undefined in the literature until the middle class politeness criterion was proposed in Allan and BurrIDGE (1991). The MCPC as defined in (1) is a frame or cultural script: a benchmark for behaviour.

I have deconstructed the MCPC and explained its components. The MCPC names social constraints on the use of language. X-phemisms indicate aspects of (im)politeness. The use of orthophemisms seems to equate with Watts' 'politic behaviour', which is not impolite and will often be described in ordinary discourse as 'polite'. Politic behaviour is typically unmarked whereas euphemism and dysphemism tend to indicate marked language, which is why Watts (2003: 20) described them as (typically) salient.

A limitation of the MCPC is that it is a default criterion which works well for decontextualized language, but – being an idealization – it cannot directly apply to the particular circumstances of an interaction in which participants and situations do not match those stated in (1). The MCPC is a benchmark for behaviour: an ideal or abstraction – like Chomsky's ideal speaker-hearer. Serving as a benchmark, the MCPC is not in practice restricted in application merely to male~female dyads, nor to adults, nor to those from the middle-class: the working-class characters in the British sitcom *The Royle Family*<sup>7</sup> utilize the MCPC and, by report, so does Queen Elizabeth II.

Another limitation is that the MCPC is not obviously applicable across space and time to all language communities. (Im)politeness as a means of managing (aspects of) social interaction is apparent in all communities. In the dictionaries of languages other than English, lexicographers make the same kind of judgments about the (im)politeness of certain words and phrases as those that led us to postulate the MCPC. Where do their intuitions come from? Where do the judgments of (im)politeness come from in works such as Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989, Matsumoto 1989 (Japanese), Gu 1990, Mao 1994, Lee-Wong 2000 (Chinese), Sifianou 1992, 2011 (Greek), Terkourafi 2001 (Cypriot Greek), Ruhi 2007 (Turkish)? The answer is: some counterpart to the MCPC which, though its constituents will be different in particulars, will name social constraints on the use of language that are designed to maintain harmonious social relations within the community. I have already noted the similarity between the MCPC and Japanese *wakimae* as described in Ide 1992 and elsewhere; this is not to claim they are the same notion but rather counterparts in different socio-cultural systems that entail

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<sup>7</sup> Created by Caroline Aherne and Craig Cash.

different conditions (for instance, Japanese politeness is more affected by a demonstrable respect that needs to be shown to others along with a humbling of self than is the norm in Anglo societies, cf. Haugh 2004, *inter alios*). Closer comparison of the MCPC with accounts of (im)politeness in non-Anglo communities and figuring out criteria by which adjustments are made on the fly to the MCPC in interactions where real participants and situations do not match those idealized in (1), I leave for future research.

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