# Review of "Politeness, Impoliteness, and Ritual: Maintaining the Moral Order in Interpersonal Interaction by Dániel Zoltan Kádár"

*Khaled Khader Oraby*
*King AbdulAziz University*
*khaled8118@yahoo.com*

Kádár's (2017) thought-provoking monograph on ritual is the result of further research by a scholar who is reputed to have delivered ground-breaking research on (im)politeness and ritual. Ritual is often understood as "a ceremony or any kind of scripted language that people use on special occasions" (p. xv). However, by using examples from a variety of real-life interactions Kádár illustrates that this phenomenon is not limited to demarcated ceremonial practices, but rather it is present in daily interactions, and it also fulfils a regulatory function: by performing rituals (as understood in Kádár's technical sense), communities maintain their interactional norms. Ritual is "a (co-)constructed phenomenon" (p. xv), which reflects and reinforces the moral order of things. As Kádár argues, "for example, inviting a person whom one finds attractive to the cinema or to dinner is a typical sexual rite of courting, while proposing to the other to 'come outside' in a pub can be a rite of challenge that precedes a fight" (p. xv).

Kádár argues that ritual has two important characteristics. First, ritual interaction is mimetic (Donald 1991), in that it re-enacts interpersonal values in a recurrent performance of symbols (Blackmore 2007), that is, linguistic and non-linguistic elements that bear special significance within a social structure. Second, ritual is a performance. In other words, it is meant to take place in front of a real or imaginary audience. This characteristic is obvious in the case of religious rituals, such as a rite of wedding, but it is also valid for interactionally (co-)constructed rituals. To provide a simple case for the latter, if a manager welcomes a new employee by uttering the simple rite of passage "Welcome on board", in Goffman's (1981) sense he will act as an animator (the sounding box through which the utterance is made) and as an author (he composes the words uttered, although in the case of rituals like this authorship is relative because of the conventional form of the ritual action). However, he can only partially take the role of principal (the entity whose beliefs are represented by the words) as a ritual by nature is meant to re-enact the view of a broader community, hence being a motor of the communal moral order. This implies that if an audience is present at the rite of passage, its members are bound to accept it because of the manager's ratified status (the community's representative) to perform the ritual. Even if no third party is present, the ritual operates with an imaginary audience (whose view is animated) in mind as a proper performance (p.15). It is because of this character of ritual that it plays an important regulatory function in communal life: by performing ritual practices, members of communities maintain or alter the moral order of a social grouping. The role of ritual in the maintenance of moral order has implications for the perception of ritual actions in terms of (im)politeness, an argument that is central to this book.

Drawing on insights from various fields, such as anthropology, cultural history and psychology, Kádár makes an unprecedented endeavour to model the interface between ritual and (im)politeness:

This book examines the complex relationship, which is believed to exist between ritual and (im)politeness by setting up a multi-layered analytic model, with a multidisciplinary approach which would be of high interest to interaction scholars, politeness researchers, social psychologists, and anthropologists. It fills an important knowledge gap and provides the first (im)politeness-focused interactional model of ritual. (p. i)

The challenge of this task is due partly to the complex relationship between (im)politeness and ritual and partly to certain misconceptions that surround these notions. Kádár claims that "one cannot talk about 'ritual (im)politeness' in general without falling into the trap of pairing an apple with a pear. Ritual is something that happens at the productive stage of the interaction, as the (claimed) moral order of things necessitates it (and the same moral order puts certain constraints on the performer to take the other's feelings into account), whereas (im)politeness comes into existence as a result of interaction" (p. 14).

A distinctive feature of Kádár's book is that it does not attempt to "provide a manual which tells the reader that if a person performs ritual action x, he will generate polite or impolite inference y" (p. xv). Instead, by using larger datasets of authentic data, Kádár aims to set up

"a replicable model, which could help the reader analyse what is happening, in terms of (im)politeness, in ritual interaction" (p. xv). Hence, Kádár claims that one needs to approach "ritual as an interactional phenomenon by means of which the moral order is maintained, that is, to use 'maintenance' in a collective sense to describe the various functions of ritual in terms of the moral order" (p. xvi).

The model is presented in this book in two steps. In Part I (Chapters 1–4), the author overviews the default operation of ritual in terms of politeness and impoliteness by examining the (im)polite fringing of rituals, that is, interactional attempts to make a ritual action sound more or less polite, as well as the lack of such fringing behaviour. This part of the book is primarily relevant to those who may want to obtain a basic knowledge about the pragmatics of ritual. In Part II (Chapters 5–8), the author studies cases of "moral aggression", in which a ritual action has a negative influence on the recipient that is regarded "as the only/most efficient way to maintain the moral order of a community. This phenomenon of moral aggression takes place quite often in our daily lives: putting a disruptive person 'back in his place' in public, telling a neighbour that his or her improperly maintained hedge inconveniences others in the neighbourhood, and interrupting a racist slur all represent this behaviour. These aggressive actions are all rituals: they animate the claimed voice of the community and they are expected to happen" (p. xx). This part of the book is relevant to politeness researchers as well as people with an interest in language aggression and/or ritual theory.

Kádár argues that "Since rituals play an important role in human lives, because of their function in the maintenance of the moral order, they bring the participants into an altered state of mind; this state is often described by using the technical term 'liminal'" (p. xvii). He provides three interrelated reasons for the presumed importance of ritual from the perspective of politeness and impoliteness, which ultimately represent its innate characteristics:

1. **Its nature as a practice of a community.**
   As ritual is basically an action that is meant to happen and represents a practice of a group of people that ultimately needs endorsement, its study does not fit into frameworks that focus on idiosyncratic behaviour. Therefore, it is hoped to contribute to (im)politeness theorisation at the macro level.

2. **Its intriguing relationship with (im)politeness**
   Ritual has been proved to have a relatively complex relationship with (im)politeness. This is because ritual action works on maintaining the moral order of a social structure. As a result, ritual can work in favour of or against the recipient.

3. **Its moral nature**
   As a result of its interface with the moral order, ritual needs to be approached from a moral perspective. Kádár reports that "the moral order has recently been adopted in a number of studies as a technical term to describe the cluster of social and personal values that underlies people's production and interpretation of (im)polite actions. Methodologically, the examination of moral order has been anchored to conversation analysis – the study of the features and organisation of interactions" (p. xix).

In the following, I overview the contents of the individual chapters of the monograph. In Chapter 1, by providing two naturally occurring anecdotes, Kádár illustrates the complexity that some given (im)polite encounters may involve in an attempt to provide a comprehensive, but sophisticated definition of ritual. According to Kádár, "ritual is basically a performance; that is, it comes into existence in front of a real or an imaginary audience. By performing rituals, members of a community reinforce an existing moral order, or transgressively create a new moral order, or do both at the same time [...] it is worth approaching ritual as an

interactional phenomenon by means of which the moral order is maintained [...], that is, to use 'maintenance' in a collective sense to describe the various functions of ritual in terms of the moral order" (p. xvi).

Chapter 2 explains why a technical definition is needed for ritual, and it illustrates that ritual interaction triggers (im)polite implications even in very simple interactions. In addition, "it provides an overview of the relational typology of ritual practices to illustrate that even if one does not take (im)polite fringing behaviour into a model of ritual and (im)politeness, there is some ambiguity that surrounds certain types of ritual practices/actions, in particular the individualistic types of covert and personal rituals" (p. 72).

In order to position ritual in the field of politeness research and to bridge the interdisciplinary gap that exists between the research of pragmatics, politeness and ritual, Chapter 3 examines these phenomena. This examination reveals the various key aspects of ritual, such as its relationship with other phenomena, for example conventional practices of interpersonal interaction. To overview this area, Kádár takes the politeness researcher's position and revisits previous relevant politeness theories, such as the difference between ritual and convention. He also reviews the politeness field from the ritual researcher's point of view and argues that ritual has been present in the field in the work of some highly influential scholars, such as Sachiko Ide (1989).

In Chapter 4, the author examines the interface between ritual and politeness by exploring how (im)polite fringing influences the evaluation of ritual practices. Kádár demonstrates that whilst the performer of a ritual practice can influence the reception of the ritual by fringing it in polite or impolite ways, the model of ritual and (im)politeness proposed here applies only when there is common moral evaluative ground between the different interlocutors. Kádár argues that when there is no such common ground, interactional evaluations of a ritual practice may become "extremely complex" (p. 136). Kádár provides a replicable model to describe the relationship between ritual behaviour and (im)polite evaluations that such behaviour triggers. The model provided is preliminary because it does not cover cases of moral aggression and examines ritual in settings in which moral sanctioning clearly influences evaluative tendencies: "The interactional events and evaluations studied are narrated and discussed in open-access social forums (discussion boards) by group outsiders. Moral sanctioning is a way for societies and groups to prevent 'disorderly and immoral' behaviour from becoming standard – it plays a key role in the maintenance of perceived moral order(s)" (p. 115). The model of ritual and (im)politeness presented here is limited to the situation where there is common moral evaluative ground between the performer and the recipient of a ritual and third-party participants. However, this common ground ceases to exist in the case of restoring local moral orders, and evaluations might become extremely complex according to Kádár "as, for example, some group members may evaluate their own practices negatively, while some others may actually believe in their euphemistic reinterpretations of the abusive action as mock impoliteness. The situation may become even more complex when it comes to socially recognised forms of ritual behaviour that animate moral aggression to restore what is regarded by societies as appropriate" (p. 136). This phenomenon is examined further in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 5, which is the first chapter of Part II, the author examines the way in which rites of moral aggression, that is, ritual practices and actions that aim to restore the moral order, operate in terms of (im)politeness. As case studies, Kádár examines the rites of countering the heckler and bystander intervention. Heckling is a social action that triggers aggression because it upsets the interactional order and violates situated interactional rights (Kádár 2014). Moreover, countering the heckler is a ritualistic phenomenon if one approaches it by combining Turner's (1969, 1982) anthropological framework with Kádár's theory that defines ritual as an interactionally (co-)constructed action (Kádár 2012, 2013). Following Turner (1982), the author defines heckling and countering the heckler as a dramatic event, which is evaluated by its watchers (third-party participants) as judges: the watchers frame the

participants of the duel as winner and loser, and so participation in this duel is a struggle for face for both the heckler and the public speaker/performer (PSP). The objective of the chapter is to demonstrate that (a) these ritual actions have some joint key characteristics and (b) that in settings that trigger these ritual actions there is social pressure on the performer and the recipient to engage in conflict. This chapter – just as the following chapters – focuses more on the complexities involved in socially recognised forms of ritual behaviour that animate moral aggression to restore what is regarded by societies as appropriate. They illustrate moral aggression cases, in which a ritual action has a negative influence on the recipient that is regarded "as the only/most efficient way to maintain the moral order of a community" (p. xix).

Chapter 6 examines how the participants' perceptions of (im)politeness and (im)morality operate in rites of moral aggression. Kádár explores the ways in which such scenarios produce "moral metareflections in terms of altruism/cruelty and (im)politeness" (p. 40), through which the interlocutors attempt to have their action(s) (de)ratified by third-party participants.

In Chapter 7, Kádár argues how the interlocutor is morally responsible through individual agency in various aspects of moral aggression: "The rites of moral aggression are reactive forms of behaviour, which aim to restore the communal moral order and the normative flow of an event, and – unless they are politely fringed – to transgress the recipient's status from ratified to an un/deratified member of the 'civil society'. The uniqueness of rites of moral aggression is that the default moral sanctioning of impolite fringing disappears in these punitive actions, provided that they fulfil the community's moral expectations" (p. 196). Kádár argues that the roles of both the heckler and the bystander are interactionally (co-)constructed rituals. Moreover, since those involved in performing rituals are not merely "robots" (p. 196), they are usually aware of their pragmatic role as a sound box of the relevant community.

In Chapter 8 – the Conclusion – the author summarises the findings and argues that his research fills two interdisciplinary gaps. First, it draws attention to the significance of studying ritual in the field of politeness research. Second, it contributes to social anthropology and ritual research outside the realm of pragmatics by providing examples of naturally occurring interactions. Kádár also lays the foundations for future research as he points out that his ritual framework can be applicable to the examination of a variety of phenomena, such as the interpretations of public discourses on the notion of ''political correctness'' (p. 223).

'Politeness, Impoliteness, and Ritual' provides a solid analytic framework from both theoretical and interactional perspectives. One of the book's strengths is the wide range of datasets drawn from various human languages from the Far East to the West. This merit gives this piece of work its authenticity and reliability, making it one of the groundbreaking works in the field in recent years. Another feature that distinguishes this work is its complex and yet accessible model, which is replicable to other languages and cultures. Last but not least, the book is written in a highly accessible fashion. Therefore, this book is a must-read for scholars involved in research related to politeness and ritual, and students and educated readers who simply want to learn about a fascinating phenomenon.

## References

Blackmore, Susan J. 2007. Imitation makes us human. In Charles Pasternak (ed.), What Makes Us Human? Oxford: Oneworld, 1–17.

Brown, Penelope, and Stephen Levinson. 1987. Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Donald, Merlin. 1991. Origins of the Modern Mind. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1981. Forms of Talk. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kádár, Dániel Z. 2012. Relational ritual. In Jef Verschueren and Jan-Ola Östman (eds.), The Handbook of Pragmatics. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1–48. https://doi.org/10.1075/hop.16.rel2

Kádár, Dániel Z. 2013. Relational Rituals and Communication: Ritual Interaction in Groups. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230393059

Kádár, Dániel Z. 2014. Heckling: A mimetic-interpersonal perspective. Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict 2(1): 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1075/jlac.2.1.01kad

Turner, Victor. 1969. The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. New Brunswick and London: Transactions.

Turner, Victor. 1982. Images of anti-temporality: An essay in the anthropology of experience. Harvard Theological Review 75(2): 243–265