

Nineteenth-century English politeness: Negative politeness, conventional indirect requests and the rise of the individual self.

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Nineteenth-century English politeness: Negative politeness, indirect requests and the rise of the individual self

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In this paper we argue that the kind of individualistic ethos Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model is accurate in particular its notion of (non-imposition) negative face — is not simply a reflection of British culture, but a reflection of a specific point in time. That point is the nineteenth century. Before then, the notion of an individual self separate from one's own hidden desires was not fully established. We argue that sociocultural developments, such as secularisation, technological and social and geographical mobility, and the rise of individualism, created conditions in which the self became part of the public domain. It was viewed as a property of the individual, and was associated with positive values such as self-help, self-control and self-reliance. We also trace the history of conventional indirect requests, specifically can/could you X structures, the most frequently used in British English today and, moreover, emblematic of British negative politeness. We show how such ability developed in the nineteenth century, and propose a tentative explanation as to why ability in particular was their

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