
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Impoliteness, Politeness and Mock Impoliteness in Naturally Occurring Data

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ABSTRACT

Research on politeness and impoliteness recently has been the focus of pragmatics and discourse analysis, but impoliteness has gained little attention. An effort was exerted to examine how such a phenomenon works in different cultures. However, impoliteness as a linguistic medium of face attack has not received sufficient area of research in the Arabic context and the intercultural context, which is the main aim of this paper. This paper demonstrates a range of incidents encountered by Arabic and English native speakers. The model of analysis in this paper is a postmodern discursive approach in which the evaluative process is emphasized. It has been found in this paper that impolite utterances do not necessarily involve impoliteness or rudeness when the interlocutors' social status, familiarity and distance are the same. This paper also showed that mock impoliteness functions as a linguistic tool for establishing solidarity between the members of the same culture when there is no intention of damaging face.

KEYWORDS

Impoliteness; Politeness; Mock Impoliteness; discourse analysis; pragmatics

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1. Introduction

Much more research on impoliteness focuses on one particular language or cross culturally different studies (Bousfield and Locher 2008, Haugh 2007, 2011), whereas less attention has been paid to impoliteness in intercultural contexts where interceptors use their second language, which is mostly English. Thus, postmodern researchers of impoliteness argued that no speech act is inherently impolite, but instead, the interpretation of impoliteness depends on the context of situations (Kecskes 2017). This paper, therefore, sheds light on the context reliance in cultural and intercultural *naturally* encountered situations where the interlocutors do not constantly depend on much prevailing common ground and mutual awareness, but they need to be co-constructed in the communicative process. It has been argued by Kecskes (2017) that poor shared awareness and common ground might restrict the interpretation of the propositional content of utterances, which may lead to misunderstanding and confusion in the actual context. The outstanding interpretation for interlocutors whose language and culture are different from the target is the ostensible meaning of the utterance. As a result, the interpretation of the utterance produced in intercultural communication depends largely on what is said rather than what is actually meant. As a sequence of their dependency on the propositional meaning of the utterances, both speaker and hearer may be unaware of im/politeness communicated indirectly or through paralinguistic means.

The recent trends in linguistic impoliteness were less dependable on naturally occurring data. In this paper, we argue that naturally occurring observations do not constitute a constant language practice or community between native and non-native speakers since, in most cases, the communication between the interlocutors is temporal because they do not often use their second language all the time. Therefore, this research is concerned with natural observations, which the data of our investigation are based on, as will be shown later in section (3). As far as this paper is concerned with impoliteness, I am not in a space to review traditional

and post-modern theories of politeness. Instead, the focus of this paper will be only on impoliteness, whether it is serious or mock, and what makes impoliteness as politeness.

2. The concept of Impoliteness

The term impoliteness has been of interest to many researchers, who emphasize its significance and operationalization in certain contexts. Culpeper (2005) follows Tracy and Tracy (1998) in defining impoliteness as communicative acts perceived by members of a social community to be purposefully offensive. One might argue that perceiving such offensive or *presumably* offensive is vital in intercultural communication because the interlocutors naturally share different cultural backgrounds and certainly different perceptions in return. Other post-modern researchers, in particular, examined impoliteness within new terms such as relational networks (Watts, 2003) and communities of practice (Kadar and Haugh, 2013).

There has been an increasing interest in the domain of studying politeness discursive turn from the speaker's orientation into the hearer's orientation approach. Postmodern theorists are nowadays concerned with insider metadiscourse rather than with analyst's intuitions. However, the process of evaluation still lacks clarity in the identification of such evaluations. This paper belongs to the discursive approach of impoliteness (first order and second order) waves (Grainger et al., 2015). It examines the perception of impoliteness in a workplace, as well as social and academic discourse. It depends on the analyst based approach of impoliteness activated in the intercultural domain. Sometimes, when we evaluate somebody as polite or rude, it might be noted that politeness is not absolutely an objective behaviour. It can be perceived as cognitive behaviour. When thinking about cognition, certain things come to mind under the term of subjectivity, such as feelings, emotions, desires, and attitudes. Politeness, furthermore, does not only involve the perception of individuals but also a concern of what others think of us and so inevitably involves what is called intersubjectivity, which is viewed as how to understand and evaluate the evaluation of others and whether we reach an agreement or a common understanding to a certain perception.

2.1 Previous research on impoliteness

Research showed that impoliteness is an attack on the face of the interlocutors, and certain impolite speech acts, such as reproaching, threatening and insulting, are performed by the speakers with the intrinsic purpose of attacking or undermining the hearer's face (Haverkate, 1988:394). Lycan (1997) shows that impoliteness can be determined based on the context of the situation. He takes an interruption as an example, saying that interruption is sometimes considered impolite and non-impolite behaviour. In most cases, it is viewed as face threatening act, especially when there is no apology for the interruption. Lycan (Ibid.) argues that it could be seen as a positive act to the development of the discussion or as a contributory act for solving a problem. Culpeper (1996) disagrees with the idea that some speech acts are inherently impolite. He argues that even if there are few, they might be very rare. Therefore, he suggests that impoliteness should be analysed by focusing on what the intentions of the speakers are supposed to have been. However, we might question whether any act is necessarily intrinsically impolite since even the most attacking insults can be used by close friends to signal solidarity. Culpeper (1996) adopts Brown and Levinson's strategies of politeness, employing them to examine impoliteness. Thus, he classifies impoliteness into three main categories: record impoliteness, positive and negative impoliteness and mock impoliteness. In his model, Culpeper (1996) differentiates between two main types of impoliteness strategies: positive impoliteness strategies and negative impoliteness strategies.

2.1.1 Positive Impoliteness Strategies

1. Ignoring others
2. Not sympathizing with others
3. Using wrong identity markers
4. Using mysterious language known to familiar people and not known to others.
5. Using insulting nomination
6. Blasphemous language
7. Excluding the third party from the group

2.1.2 Negative impoliteness output strategies:

1. *Frighten* the addressee that something dangerous will occur.
2. *Scorn others* by emphasizing the relative power. Be contemptuous and belittling others by using diminutive forms.
3. *Taken position closer to the other than it is permitted.*
4. *Personalizing the relationship by using the pronouns 'I' and 'you'.*

However, a new perspective on impoliteness differs from the previous ones launched by Terkourafi (2008). This new postmodern view focuses on the perception of the hearer rather than the speaker's intention. Terkourafi uses the term *face constituting act* as an opposite to Brown and Levinson's face threatening act. Terkourafi (2008:64-70) classifies impoliteness into five types: "unmarked politeness, unmarked rudeness, marked politeness, marked rudeness or rudeness and impoliteness". These types are explained as follows:

- a) Unmarked politeness refers to something that is conventionalized and expected in a certain situation, whereas marked politeness is about something which is not conventional or expected in a given situation. In addition, marked politeness occurs when the hearer does not recognize the speaker's intention to make face constituting act, whereas unmarked politeness takes place when there is face constituting act that is conventionalised and expected in the context.
- b) Marked rudeness refers to causing face threatening act recognized by the hearer, whereas unmarked rudeness occurs when there is a face threatening act that is conventionalised and expected by the hearer.
- c) Impoliteness is identified as face threatening act while the addressee does not recognize the intention to attack the face.

Now, it is time to demonstrate the far end of the scale of impoliteness, which is mock impoliteness, which is the main concern of this paper.

2.3 Mock Impoliteness

"I once turned up at a party at 7.00 pm, only to discover the party had started at 17.00hrs and had almost finished. Upon telling the host, a friend, the reason for my mistake, he replied, "You silly bugger. He used a conventionally impolite insult. But of course, I did not take offence - this was friendly banter".

Recognizing mock impoliteness depends largely on some degree of incompatibility between the formulae used and the context of the situation. Culpeper (1996) states that mock impoliteness works as fostering social closeness when it is apparent to the interlocutors that impoliteness is not seriously meant. Mock impoliteness can also be used when there might be a sense of truth in the expressions. According to Yedes (1996), it could be considered as "playing teasing in family and work situations that allow conflicts to be mitigated, to establish intimacy, encourages equity between the interlocutors. He notes that "banter or mock impoliteness might allow someone to utter something closer to their true feelings in an exaggerated form at the same time as posing it in a manner where it will be interpreted on the surface at least as non-serious" (p:418). Mock impoliteness is described by Leech (1983) as sociable rudeness and ritual abuse. Further, Culpeper (1996:352) states that mock impoliteness is a kind of politeness that stays ambiguous since there is no intention to cause harm. It, therefore, can be socially advantageous for the interlocutors to establish interactional patterns without confronting the conventional pattern of their communicative act. In addition, mock impoliteness expresses positive politeness in a unique way. However, very little research has focused on mocking impoliteness in intercultural contexts. This paper focuses on some situations encountered by Arabic speakers using their mother tongue and their second language, English, with native and non-native speakers of English.

Nonetheless, the main question posed by the new view of the postmodern approach of politeness is on which base does the hearer understand impoliteness and mock impoliteness? And does the hearer succeed in inferring the speaker's intention to threaten and constitute a face act?

3. Methodology, Results and Discussions

In this paper, I focus on collecting naturally occurring data that involves apparently impolite expressions. Therefore, an ethnographic method was deemed to be appropriate (Gumperz, 1999) and thus used in this research. The data collected in this paper involve both personal and participant observation. The advantage of this method is that it provides an illustration of spontaneous speech acts which might otherwise be difficult to elicit.

4. Results and Discussions

This section analyses the data of this paper, which were encountered in cultural and intercultural communication between native and non-native speakers.

Extract (1): On the phone

Jasim: Hello Samar, how are you? Have you brought a meal to me?

Samar: Ah.... [Astonished] sorry, do you mean...?

Ali: Sorry, is it forbidden to have meal in the university? If yes, I think he's so polite.

Samar: Oh...am not sure; I think he's joking.

People do not always say what they mean. In other words, they refrain from saying something in order either to show off their social etiquette or to be polite, avoiding damaging the addressee's face. Jasim's question implies the refusal of Samar's social activity 'bringing food to the staff during the work'. This inference was made by Ali, as a metaparticipant, who had previously known that having food while working in the university was not allowed. In terms of producing an utterance like 'Have you brought a meal to me?' indicates a high level of politeness since the speaker is in a high ranked position in the university. Such inference could be

deemed to be permissible or reasonable to draw, i.e. the consequences inferred by the listener seem reasonable to draw. Kadar (2013) identifies such inference as permissible as opposed to a defeasible, which allows for the possibility of error and expectations. Jasim's implied refusal to have a meal during work hours might be understood as polite refusal since he adopted indirectness, which left the door open for the hearers to infer. In terms of social distance between Jasim and Samer, it is seen that they are socially distant because Jasim is the dean's assistant, whereas Samar is a lecturer. It could be argued here that politeness is usually associated with respect in the Arabic culture, i.e. being respectful in the Arabic culture could allow the speaker to have an impact on the addressee. This situation can also be perceived as being a conventional style where the minimal context of high- low position and social distance rank was anticipated rather than inferred. In this regard, Terkourafi (2005: 248) argued that politeness can be anticipated when the co-occurrence of particular expressions as the unchallenged realization of particular acts..., create the perception of politeness. Consequently, the expression 'Have you brought a meal to me?' is conventionalised by another metaparticipant as a social practice in Arabic situations for making refusal to unsocial behaviour. This perception also made the participant hold the belief that Jasim's utterance falls under polite behaviour due to the usage of indirectness.

Extract (2): On impoliteness

A brief chat between three persons in the academic situation:

Ziyad: hi there, I am very interested in your poster, could you explain it much more?

Nazhat: Yes, sure [started speaking.....]

Christina: [interrupted] asking Ziyad, are you PhD student?

Ziyad: yes, I am... um,. are you her supervisor? asked Ziyad.

Nuzar: No! Am I too old?

Ziyad: Oh, no, no, I don't mean that... [smiling].

Christina: that's OK, you don't have to apologize.

Am I too old? seems to be offended because *Nuzar* thought being the supervisor of PhD students implies being too old. There are two assumptions in her question: (a) a mockery reaction intended to make an informal conversation and a minimal annoyance of losing face caused by *Ziyad*, who started his apology by laughing and feeling embarrassed. This perception comes as a result of the cultural difference in perceiving age. *Ziyad*, who is an Arabic individual, thinks that talking about age is normal, whereas *Christina*, who is British, perceives age as not preferable to talk about as being a part of privacy. It becomes clear that there is a joint understanding that perceiving each one's behaviour based on cultural differences is why the conversation did not last too long.

A lay-observer participant perceives this situation as 'talking about age, especially with females' is taboo to a certain extent from the Western perspective. In Western countries, according to lay-observer, one should be careful in such private issues. Another lay observer participant confirmed that *Christina's* reply could form a negative assessment of *Ziyad's* utterance as impolite. However, it remains an open question whether *Christina* perceives *Ziyad's* utterance as polite or sarcastic.

Extract (3): Cultural incident

Ayad: Could you pour a cup for me?

Mey: Yes, with pleasure.

Ayad: Thanks love

Mey: no worries, but next time, don't call me 'love.'

Using more intimate expression could reframe the addressee as lower. *Mey's* reaction made the requester furious so that the addressee could be deemed as being against solidarity and involvement. Addressing women in the collectivistic culture, particularly Arabic, is very sensitive and problematic. Thus, my thanking was perceived as a simple offence on behalf of the listener. Therefore, failing to convey politeness in the right way could cause impoliteness, especially with people whose pragmatic competence in English is poor, because expressing intentions without going off the record while the addressee expects to receive the message expressed outright. However, *but next time, don't call me 'love'* indicates the seriousness rather than impoliteness due to the nature of the situation. Uttering the word love to women in an Islamic society might be very sensitive in workplace situations. Using expressions like these might be assigned to the speakers' seriousness, which does not encourage equity or establish intimacy between the interlocutors.

Another intercultural situation encountered by a British and Somalian in a university:

Amina: Martin, would you like to join me to the supermarket?

Martin: I am sorry, I am a bit busy.

Amina: I wish if you could come with me; I cannot go alone.

Martin: fuck off. I told you I am busy right now.

Amina: Oh, no worries, no worries, just chill.

The expression *fuck off* which is really impolite, was used by the British student, whereas it was processed by the Somalian student as being not offensive since both of them seem to be familiar with the load of impoliteness in English; therefore, no losing face was recorded in this situation. The addressee attempts to reduce the potential conflict, if any, by using words indicating apology, such as 'no worries, no worries, just chill'. In other words, Amina recognizes the possible aggressive attitude of Martin's aforementioned utterance. This is similar to what happened in an intercultural situation when two Iraqi Arabic native speakers contacted via their second language, which is English:

F: Hi, bro. I'd appreciate if you make a professional proofreading for some papers?

A: Hi love, sure send them please.

F: Within this day!

A: OK why such in a hurry? Send it.

F: Pls check your whatsapp

A: Can you send the file to my email?

F: Send your fucking email.

A: haha, here is my fucking email

Mock impoliteness could also be inferred and established when both the speaker and the listener share the same cultural background and have an equal social status. In other words, mock impoliteness can be easily found in online communication more than in face to face interaction since the non-proximity of the addressee affords the opportunity to the speaker 'sender' to be mock impolite. For this, we could argue that it is not completely true that all impolite utterances are necessarily impolite or face threatening acts because even the rudest utterance can be used as a way for signalling solidarity and intimacy between close friends. However, it seems from our data analysis that different cultures have ideologies in which producing impoliteness can be positively valued. The expressions of impoliteness discussed above assure that impoliteness may project solidarity and involvement in certain cultural groups, such as the Arabic culture, although they might be viewed negatively by others.

The results of the analysis show that im/politeness and mock impoliteness in terms of interpersonal relations may be better understood than described on the basis of traditional approaches to analysis. The analysis of the current data differs from the conventionalised strategies commonly used in interaction. This leads us to the phenomena of individual evaluation. In terms of interpersonal evaluation, we are left to be asked what makes the individuals im/polite and what underlines the basis of their evaluations.

The processing of literal meaning on behalf of the non-native speaker has an effect on understanding im/politeness. Consequently, without context dependency, actual mock impoliteness can be perceived as purely impoliteness when it should not. As noted earlier, Ziyad did not recognize the aggressive intention of the addressee, or might be rudeness when she said, '*...but next time, don't call me 'love'*'. Then Ziyad has processed the literal meaning of her utterance as serious and less impolite since the direct prohibition ***next time Don't +infinitive*** involves warning and threat. Nevertheless, the actual situational context encountered makes the addressee confused because the seriousness of the utterance indicates impoliteness while the speaker's gesture of 'smiling' decelerates the degree of impoliteness. Moreover, the interlocutors do not constantly depend on much prevailing common ground and mutual awareness, but they need to be co-constructed in the communicative process. The poor shared awareness and common ground might restrict the interpretation of the propositional content of utterances, which may lead to misunderstanding and confusion in the actual context. The outstanding interpretation for interlocutors whose language and culture are different from the target is the ostensible meaning of the utterance. As a result, the interpretation of the utterance produced in intercultural communication depends largely on what is said rather than what is actually communicated because the speaker's intention is unknown or not recognized. As a sequence of their dependency on the propositional meaning of the utterances, both speaker and hearer may be unaware of impoliteness communicated indirectly or through paralinguistic means.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that impoliteness may function as face threatening act when the intention for damaging the face is recognized, whereas it can be solidifying and constituting a face act when there is no intention to harm or offend the hearer. This has been argued in terms of no act being inherently impolite, but context dependency is the key factor in determining what is polite and impolite. This cannot be so compatible when using a second language rather than the first language as a tool of communication in intercultural situations. This paper has also argued that evaluating politeness depends on the context of the situation in general and the precedence of literal meaning, familiarity and impoliteness of cultural norms. Research on impoliteness

is a new area of investigation, but its main problem is that having natural data is still an unreachable goal. This research, however, analysed a few natural data encountered in the workplace and social occasions. This paper suggests that impoliteness in cross cultural pragmatics and discourse research needs to be addressed further.

Thus, solidarity, friendship and involvement can be established by uttering rude and impolite expressions.

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