



Introduction

Denis Jamet, Manuel Jobert

► To cite this version:

Denis Jamet, Manuel Jobert. Introduction. Aspects of Linguistic Impoliteness, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. hal-01399521

HAL Id: hal-01399521

<https://univ-lyon3.hal.science/hal-01399521>

Submitted on 23 Nov 2016

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

INTRODUCTION

DENIS JAMET

UNIVERSITE JEAN MOULIN – LYON 3,
CEL – EA 1663, FRANCE

MANUEL JOBERT

UNIVERSITE JEAN MOULIN – LYON 3,
CREA – EA 370, FRANCE

Ever since the publication of *Politeness – Some Universals in Language Use* in 1978, the study of verbal interactions has been somewhat biased and “linguistic politeness” has established itself as the main research area. Brown & Levinson’s model has of course been adapted and criticised but it remains highly influential. In *Principles of Pragmatics*, Leech [1983] suggested an alternative model more explicitly based on Gricean pragmatics but also favouring politeness. More recently, however, a new research paradigm has emerged, that of impoliteness. Many scholars, like Culpeper [1996], [2003], [2005] and [2010] or Bousfield [2008], now endeavour to counterbalance the previous theory and study the notion of “impoliteness” more thoroughly than ever before. Is the study of impoliteness set to replace the study of politeness? Is it simply a way of compensating for a research area that has been neglected for too long or is it the beginning of a new approach to the study of verbal interactions encompassing both politeness and impoliteness under the umbrella term of (im)politeness as Watts [2003] and Kerbrat-Orecchioni [2005] seem to advocate?

In *Talks and Talkers*, Robert Louis Stevenson [1882: 30-31] clearly indicates that two forces are at work in conversations: the first one can be defined as a positive force which secures harmony during verbal interactions while the other – the negative force – is based on verbal struggle. Stevenson’s intuition seems to be corroborated by the various theories currently available to analyse speech-in-interaction. In *Empreintes de l’euphémisme, tours et détours* [Jamet & Jobert 2010], several papers highlight the fact that politeness strategies are closely linked to euphemism while dysphemism is clearly on the side of impoliteness strategies. This suggests that the positive / negative force dichotomy concerns discourse but also the lexicon, hence, language at large. The fact that several competing theories exist indicates that research is actively in progress. The field, it seems, is now clear for linguists to consider the duality inherent in human behaviour, hovering between harmony and struggle, dubbed “politeness” and “impoliteness” by conversation analysts.

Another problem is raised when dealing with (im)politeness. The terms used tend to confuse the issue as they are used both technically i.e. linguistically, as well as in everyday language to characterise a person’s behaviour or speech. Attempts have been made to distinguish between social (im)politeness and linguistic (im)politeness. Watts [2003: 30] explains:

[...] we rapidly encountered the term ‘politeness’ as a technical term used in the pragmatic and sociolinguistic study of socio-communicative verbal interaction, and I suggested that the use of the term should be referred to as ‘second-order politeness’ (politeness 2).

However, a certain porosity remains between the two types of (im)politeness and linguists should make sure that the definitions they provide are intuitively compatible with the lay meaning of the terms. As a matter of fact, between July and August 2011, the French newspaper *le Monde* published eighteen articles on “Politeness in the world” (*La politesse dans le monde*). Although these articles were aimed at the general public, they exhibit very interesting comments on language usage and behaviour in several countries. While some major differences were expected about politeness in China or in Columbia, it was surprising to discover major differences among European countries. Some of them concern social behaviours while others directly impact linguistic behaviour. For instance, in Germany, the notion of *Ehlichkeit*, often translated as “sincerity” is the basis for the understanding of how German conversations work: directness is politeness (*le Monde*, 8 August 2011). Similarly, in Spain, the more brutal the speech, the more the speaker seems to care about his/her interlocutor (*Le Monde*, 7 August 2011). The point of these remarks is not to highlight cultural and linguistic differences. These are well known and have been studied at length in *Politeness in Europe* by Hickey & Stewart [2005] or in *Politeness in East Asia* by Kadar & Mills [2011], to quote but a few. What is striking is that people from different backgrounds (those specializing in Anthropology, Linguistics, Media Studies, as well as lay people) are now tackling these issues and it befalls to linguists to provide analytical frameworks accessible to specialists and lay people alike.

This is precisely the purpose of this book in which linguists, discourse analysts and literary critics contribute to the clarification of impoliteness as a common research paradigm. Although most contributors base their analyses on the pragmatics of talk-in-interaction, the variety of the subject-matter tackled makes this volume a valuable contribution to impoliteness. Various researchers have therefore been selected to contribute to *Aspects of Linguistic Impoliteness*, and the diversity of sub-disciplinary approaches is reflected in the multi-dimensional organisation of the five sections of the book which is divided into 5 thematic chapters, with 15 parts in all, as presented below.

The first chapter “**General Approaches to Impoliteness and Rudeness**” aims to study the links between impoliteness and rudeness, by providing a general framework for these notions. The chapter opens with an introductory article by **Jonathan Culpeper**, entitled “Impoliteness: Questions and Answers”, which intends to define the very notion of “impoliteness”, and the reasons for studying it. Related topics concerning the creativity of impoliteness, as well as the most frequent linguistic ways in which somebody causes impoliteness are also tackled. The main point is to demonstrate clearly that impoliteness, because of its complex nature, and the serious implications it has for interpersonal communication and society as a whole, is deserving of serious and concentrated academic study. **Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni** in “Politeness, impoliteness, non-politeness, “polirudeness”: The case of political TV debates” shows that in order to identify an utterance as polite or impolite, its content (as a face-threatening act (FTA), a face-flattering act (FFA) or a combination of both), its formulation, and its context of production must be taken into account, and other categories besides politeness and impoliteness must also be introduced into the theoretical system. Here, the hybrid notion of “polirudeness” is shown to be essential. Kerbrat-Orecchioni provides a detailed analysis of two political speeches given during the 2007 French presidential election to demonstrate that the way an utterance is qualified by the analyst is entirely dependent on the definitions initially adopted. In “The power of impoliteness: a historical perspective”, **Sandrine Sorlin** shows that throughout the ages the word “politeness” has taken on various meanings, and that the notion of “impoliteness” can be perceived more positively than it commonly is. Yet, linguistics always tends to define it as a violation of cooperative rules, even though those resorting to impolite language may have different objectives. She goes on to examine the potential subversive power

inherent in impoliteness, highlighting the parallels between politeness and political correctness, and concludes on a new definition of impoliteness that makes it a positive non-conformist resisting force.

The second chapter “**Impoliteness in Television Series and in Drama**” deals with occurrences of impoliteness in television series and drama and opens with **Linda Pillière**’s “*Dr. House and the Language of Offense*”. The aim of this paper is not to reconsider theoretical frameworks nor to add another definition to the term “impoliteness”, but to study how impolite language and behaviour work within a specific context and how they can be used to create humour. Linda Pillière’s point is to offer a different way of viewing impoliteness that is based on theories of interpretation and context models, and to highlight the need to see offensive language in relation to context models, as the study of a television series, such as *House*, clearly demonstrates. In “Domestic and Professional Abuse in *Fawlty Towers*” **Manuel Jobert** shows that comedy-shows, such as *Fawlty Towers*, heavily rely on verbal abuse, which suggests that laughter is often triggered by impolite interaction, and that impoliteness is clearly one of the major sources of comedy both in the private and the public sphere. This tends to demonstrate that impoliteness is not simply an element of characterisation but an essential ingredient present on several planes simultaneously in the series. **Natalie Mandon** in “‘Polite company’?: Offensive Discourse in William Congreve’s Comedies” examines how Congreve successfully combines two aims: the staging of verbal interaction in which language is used to cause offence and at the same time achieve comic effect. She shows that determining what is offensive must rely not only on the response of stage characters but also on what we know about the linguistic norms of the period, i.e. what constituted appropriate and/or acceptable linguistic behavior and what did not in a seventeenth-century London theatre.

The third chapter “**Impoliteness in Prose Fiction**” mainly focuses on the discursive creations of impoliteness found in literary works. The chapter opens with a contribution from **Brindusa Grigoriu** entitled “Medieval Rudeness: The English Version of a French Romance Custom” in which Grigoriu offers a contrastive analysis of the French and the English version of Tristan and Ysolt following Brown and Levinson’s “Politeness Theory”. **Jacqueline Fromonot** in “Paradoxes of Impoliteness in *Vanity Fair*, by W.M. Thackeray” demonstrates that Thackeray varies strategies to address the issue of linguistic impoliteness in fictional and metafictional passages. This contribution aims to show that impoliteness can be analysed using three related sub-categories: “polite impoliteness”, “impolite politeness” and “impolite impoliteness”, which can be used to structure the rhetorical and stylistic investigation of impoliteness in *Vanity Fair*. In “Impoliteness and rebellion in “Christmas” by John McGahern”, **Vanina Jobert** focuses on the combination of verbal strategies of character, narrator and author, which produce a specific effect on the reader. Those verbal interactions help build a very specific text world ruled by rigid social codes and at the same time feature a dynamic process of rebellion. **Claire Majola** in ““Who are they to talk to us like that?” Narrative impoliteness and the reader” lays emphasis on the fact that impoliteness cannot be an aim, but a strategy and as such, a central component of what could be termed “authorial policy”. After reminding the reader of the main taboo topics in Irish literature, she focuses on Colum McCann’s story “Everything in this Country Must” to show how authorial strategies can be seen to “work on” the reader, thereby suggesting that literary interaction is face-flattering, or rather, face-enhancing.

The fourth chapter, “**Impoliteness in Philosophy of Language**”, concentrates on impoliteness and the philosophy of language. The chapter opens with **Célia Schneebeli**’s “Systematized impoliteness in the nonsense world of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and

Through the Looking-Glass”, in which she presents a reading of *Alice in Wonderland* using Geoffrey Leech’s “Politeness Principle” and Lecercle’s “Impoliteness Principle”. As for **Simone Rinzler** in “Impoliteness, *agôn*, *dissensus* in “The Two Philosophers”: Irvine Welsh and a political philosophy of language”, she analyses a short story by Irvine Welsh, “The Two Philosophers”, in which the rules of dialogue are flouted continuously. Rinzler resorts to Lecercle’s *Philosophy of Nonsense*, in which he conceives a set of principles of struggle to deconstruct the two famous principles implemented by Leech – the “Politeness Principle” – and by Grice – the “Co-operative Principle”.

The fifth and final chapter “**Impoliteness and Modern Communication**” offers three case-studies of impoliteness in modern communication, be it oral communication or virtual communication. **Isabelle Gaudy-Campbell** in “*You know*: (im)politeness marker in naturally occurring speech?” investigates the hedging function of *you know* and its face-saving dimension. Is *you know* a genuine address to the hearer, or rather a fake address, a form of mock politeness, making it possible to impose a consensus by presenting it as agreed upon? In “Alternative spelling and censorship: the treatment of profanities in virtual communities” **Laura Goudet** presents a study of the ways used to avoid profanities and insults on the Internet, by focusing on the use of automated censorship scripts as a means to neutralize offensive words and expressions with a simple substitution command. The study is based on the most important African American related website, *Black Planet*, and examines other layers of identification, anti-identification and name-calling that come into play. The volume ends with **Bertrand Richet**’s “*Fanning the Flames? A Study of Insult Forums on the Internet*” which investigates insult forums on the Internet, raising key questions such as: Why and how is an insult forum created? How does it evolve? What does it imply? What is the usefulness of an insult forum? Can one really insult somebody else, other than on a very short term basis, for no other reason than the pleasure derived from the act of insulting?”

Each exploring a theme of its own, these five chapters bring together in a single volume a carefully chosen collection of scholarly reflections on linguistic impoliteness. Seeking to address the emerging interest, both academic and non-academic, in this topic, *Aspects of Linguistic Impoliteness* provides a multidisciplinary perspective. As such, it is an excellent reference for readers who seek both an introduction to impoliteness as well as a guide to the current breadth of scholarly work on this phenomenon.