

The Interplay of Self-Politeness and Other-Impoliteness: A Data-Based Study

Anna Wiechecka
Lingwistyczna Szkoła Wyższa, Warsaw

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show the correlation between self-politeness and other-impoliteness in linguistic data. Both terms derive from Brown and Levinson's politeness theory. A model of self-politeness was introduced by Chen, who emphasizes that, in interaction, self-face is as vulnerable as the face of other, and deserves equal interest and recognition. While this model is promising and enlightening, self-politeness seems to be lacking detailed investigation. A linguistic impoliteness model has been described by Culpeper, who stresses that rudeness in language is more than just 'lack of politeness.' The crucial aims of other-impoliteness are: promoting disharmony in conversation and attacking the hearer's face. Culpeper's model employs a set of impoliteness strategies, which are mirror reflections of those by Brown and Levinson. This paper focuses on one area of natural data where these two phenomena are successfully combined. The source of the data is negative feedback and responses to this feedback given after transactions via eBay. I highlight various impoliteness strategies and tactics, which at the same time display numerous features of self-politeness. I also discuss the problem of how the impoliteness of an utterance ties up with its directness or indirectness, and secondly, the specificity of context interpreting an utterance as rude.

Keywords: self-politeness, self-face, impoliteness, directness, indirectness, implicature, positive/negative face

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu bliższe przyjrzenie się dwóm różnym zjawiskom w pragmatyce językoznawczej: uprzejmości wobec samego siebie oraz nieuprzejmości wobec odbiorcy. Przedmiotem analizy są dane empiryczne, w których obydwa te zjawiska, wywodzące się z teorii uprzejmości sformułowanej przez Brown i Levinsona, występują razem w spontanicznej komunikacji. Model uprzejmości wobec samego siebie autorstwa Chena zakłada, że uprzejmość nadawcy wobec samego siebie i poszanowanie własnej twarzy w komunikacji jest równie ważne, jak uprzejmość wobec odbiorcy. Z kolei model nieuprzejmości wobec odbiorcy został opisany m.in. przez Culpepera. Autor podkreśla, że nieuprzejmość językowa to problem znacznie bogatszy i bardziej zróżnicowany niż „brak uprzejmości” i że rządzi się ona swoimi prawami, ma też własne strategie i taktyki, stanowiące lustrzane odbicie strategii Brown i Levinsona. Artykuł przedstawia obszar danych językowych, w którym oba te zjawiska współistnieją, a mianowicie spory i wymiany negatywnych komentarzy między użytkownikami popularnego sklepu internetowego i serwisu aukcyjnego eBay po zakończeniu transakcji. Tego typu konflikty obfitują w strategię uprzejmości wobec siebie i nieuprzejmości wobec odbiorcy, które są wymienione i szczegółowo opisane. Zaprezentowane są również klasyfikacje dwóch najważniejszych aktów mowy w kłótniach między klientami a sprzedawcami, czyli oskarżeń i odpowiedzi na oskarżenia. Omówiony jest też problem pośredniości i bezpośredniości językowej w danych w oparciu o teorię konwersacji Grice’a oraz implikaturę konwersacyjną. Kolejny temat stanowi korelacja pośredniości i bezpośredniości językowej z (nie)uprzejmością językową. Ostatnie zagadnienie to specyfika kontekstu i jego rola w interpretacji nieuprzejmości językowej.

Słowa kluczowe: uprzejmość wobec siebie, własna twarz nadawcy, nieuprzejmość, bezpośredniość, pośredniość, implikatura, twarz pozytywna/negatywna

1.0 Introduction

This article aims at showing co-occurrences of politeness to self and impoliteness to other in natural interaction. Both terms originated from Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness and they are, in different ways, its mirror reflections. A self-politeness model

has been devised by Chen, who introduces the notion of ‘self-face’ and emphasizes its importance in conversation. However, his framework has not been examined in greater detail and there is also a need for data-based research in this respect. In turn, Culpeper is one of the first authors to propose a full-fledged, major framework of linguistic impoliteness treated as a separate phenomenon in conversation. His paper initiated a lot of studies, both theoretical and empirical, including Harris, Bousfield, Locher and Watts or Terkourafi. Linguistic impoliteness research continues to date.

I claim that self-politeness and impoliteness towards other are observable together, and wish to prove it in this data-based study. It sheds light on one particular field of interaction where combinations of those two phenomena can be found. Furthermore, I wish to enumerate and classify various forms of those co-occurrences and focus on the function of directness and indirectness therein, highlighting the importance of the particularized conversational implicature (Grice). Finally, I wish to discuss the distinctive nature of the context in which they occur.

The paper starts with a summary of the relevant theoretical background: a framework of self-politeness by Chen and an impoliteness model by Culpeper as well as Bousfield. It then proceeds to the data presentation, classification and analysis, with emphasis on various factors that may influence the incidence of such combinations.

2.0 Theoretical Background

2.1 Self-Politeness

In his paper, Chen postulates that, as speakers, we have a tendency to protect our face from attacks and possible threats (88), hence our face is as important and deserves as much attention as the hearer’s face. His model should be viewed, he argues, as an extension of Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness, which overestimates the role of the hearer (or other, as the author puts it) and does not provide enough insight into the speaker’s perspective (90–92). He coins the term ‘self-face,’ which, crucially, does not only apply to the speaker themselves. ‘Self’ might, in fact, refer to everything associated with the speaker, like their next of kin, friends, home, profession, identity, nationality, cultural or social background etc. Self-face is quite fragile and very often exposed to Face Threatening Acts, or FTAs (Brown/Levinson), just like the other’s face (88–90). Acts that aim at saving self-face are instances of self-politeness. The following exchange is

a case in point. Both A and B are Americans. A is looking for a house and, finding one, he is still uncertain whether to buy it or not so he turns to B for some information about the area:

A: Is this a relatively safe area? I mean break-ins and all that.

B: Well ... as safe as it can be nowadays. There have been some activities here and there, but people watch for each other's homes and things aren't that bad (89).

We can notice that A's question, though seemingly polite, could be interpreted as a mild threat to B's self-face. A appears to put in doubt the safety and tranquility of this particular place. This offends an important rule of American culture, which states that one's neighbourhood indicates one's social position, therefore it should never be criticized in conventionally polite conversations. Here, the term 'self' has obviously been extended to accommodate B's neighbourhood and place of living, so A has offended B's self-face. B manages to defend it by providing an answer that flouts the Gricean maxims of Quantity and Manner: it is convoluted and over-informative on purpose. Here, B provides an additional layer of meaning, or a conversational implicature, also referred to as the intended meaning; B implicates that A's query is slightly inappropriate.

Chen mentions that threats to the speaker's face have to abide by certain criteria. Two of them are especially prominent: the degree of confrontationality of a communicative event and the gravity of the threat, which in turn is made of two aspects: severity and directness (Brown/Levinson 96).

Other instances showing the fragility of self-face are not uncommon: inquisitive questions or remarks during interviews and trials (Brown/Levinson 89–90), talk shows or interrogations, to name but a few.

2.2 Impoliteness to Other

Culpeper's impoliteness model may not be the first approach to describe rudeness in pragmatics (cf. Lachenicht), but it has certainly paved the way for other impoliteness frameworks and analyses. To Culpeper, the two basic aims of linguistic impoliteness are, firstly, promoting social disharmony, disequilibrium in cooperation and conversation, and secondly, attacking the hearer's face (350). His framework constitutes a mirror reflection of Brown and Levinson's positive vs. negative politeness dichotomy, that is, he

introduces positive and negative impoliteness (attacking positive and negative face respectively), along with sets of strategies accompanying each type. Positive impoliteness is exemplified by strategies like: ‘ignore/snub the other,’ ‘disassociate from the other,’ ‘be disinterested,’ ‘seek disagreement’ or ‘call the other names’ whereas negative impoliteness is observable in frightening, condescending or ridiculing other or invading the other’s space (358–359).

Bousfield suggests some improvements to Culpeper’s concept of impoliteness. To begin with, he posits the existence on-record and off-record impoliteness. The former strives to attack the face of an interactant, construct the hearer’s face in a non-harmonious way and, finally, deny what the expected face wants. The latter, off-record type resides in sarcasm and withholding politeness when it is expectable (95–96). Furthermore, Bousfield questions the need for positive vs. negative dichotomy and suggests that it be replaced by a continuum (93–94). In his analysis, he tackles the problem of how impoliteness develops in discourse by looking at longer stretches of talk. This leads him to identify three levels of impoliteness analysis: utterance, discoursal and turn-taking impoliteness (145–260).

A good example of linguistic impoliteness can be seen in this extract from an episode of an American television show *Desperate Housewives*. This scene takes place in an advertising agency. The participants are Lynette and Nina; both are around the age of forty. Nina is Lynette’s boss. Lynette, a new employee, is about to make a very important presentation and pitch a new product to potential clients in a couple of days. Nina clearly dislikes Lynette, and has shown it on numerous occasions. They are discussing the advertising campaign in a room full of co-workers:

N: And can you do me a favor and maybe not wear the green suit? [for the meeting with the clients]

L: Um, I wasn’t planning to, uh, but why?

N: The fabric. It just has this quality to it like you could, I don’t know, wipe it clean with a damp cloth (*Desperate Housewives*, season II, ep.6).

Here, Nina succeeds in ridiculing and embarrassing Lynette by being indirectly impolite. In her (purposefully complicated) description, she manages to implicate that her employee’s clothes are filthy, Lynette herself is messy, she will not make a good impression and therefore is not reliable. This is an example of both negative impoliteness, as Nina questions Lynette’s look, attitude and also professionalism.

2.3 Self-Politeness and Other-Impoliteness Occurring Together: an Example

Before we analyze the data, it is advisable to consider a typical example of a co-occurrence of self-politeness and other-impoliteness. The context of this exchange is as follows: A is a businessman in his late twenties and he needs an interpreter for a business meeting with a prospective partner. B is an interpreter in her mid-twenties, but she has already gained some experience. A is aware of this and he wants to hire B, but he has his doubts:

A: Will you manage to do this? Are you sure? I mean, I would like it *professional*, you know.

B: Well, will YOU manage to pay ME? (Natural data)

A's utterance displays negative impoliteness: he is questioning B's abilities and her expertise, thought to be part of our negative face. He is also indirectly stating (implicating) that perhaps B is not professional or experienced enough. His question is also an FTA. B's retort represents a combination of self-politeness and other-impoliteness: she manages to salvage and enhance her self-face and also offend A by questioning his capacities and financial resources, which is an FTA and an instance of negative impoliteness, as financial status is usually associated with negative face. The strategy employed is termed by Culpeper as 'put the other down' (358). The implicature of B's reply is that A cannot afford to hire a professional like B.

3.0 Data Presentation

The data inspected are Internet sources coming from the website ebay.co.uk, a hugely popular online shop and auctioning service, selling a variety of goods. Of particular interest was negative feedback produced by the buyers after online transactions conducted via eBay: in fact, such comments, combined with a response by the sellers, made highly conflictive and confrontational exchanges, abundant in self-politeness and impoliteness strategies. The starting point for my analysis was a unit made of a negative comment issued by the buyer, followed by a reply produced by the seller. In total, I have analyzed 200 such exchanges, which has revealed certain regularities and analogies that I am going to discuss in brief.

By and large, the negative feedback by the buyers is impolite towards the sellers, and usually represents an FTA of high confrontationality. Such accusations could be divided

into direct and indirect ones; in the latter case, an implicature has to be drawn, which is impolite to other.

In turn, responses given by the sellers are at the same time self-polite (the sellers, who write them, wish to defend their self-face) and impolite towards the buyers. Indirect responses convey an implicature which is both self-polite and other-impolite.

3.1 Negative Feedback (Accusations): Classification

Most of the negative feedback took the form of accusations, which is why I assumed an accusation to be the central speech act for my analysis. The accusations have been classified according to three criteria: their linguistic form, propositional content and the implicatures derivable from them.

3.1.1 Accusations: Linguistic Form

Some of the accusations are written in telegraphic style, which creates a sense of urgency, often reinforced by the use of passive voice, for instance: *Wrong size advertised – Only partial refund given – REPORTED!!*¹² A big number of accusations was formulated in full sentences, resembling a very short story or a narrative, like in these examples: *These people have kept our money [sic] since 16 Dec without sending an explanation* or *Refused to replace a 5 Euro worth of article that was never received*. In some accusations, a repetition of a phrase enhances the impoliteness effect, which has been observed in by Holmes (355) and Bousfield (174–175): *1st charger didn't work, 2nd charger didn't work. You get what you pay for*. The effect is reinforced when the element repeated is an exclamation (*Note Fraudster! Note Fraudster! Paid and does not want me to send.*).

3.1.2 Accusations: Propositional Content

A vast majority of the comments simply criticize the goods: *asked for black got pink, out of shape, do not match display photo*, or the customer service: *Seller fails to send item which I paid for and then claims I did not pay it*. The accusations are at times paired with

¹ The spelling, punctuation and grammar in most examples from ebay.co.uk are original and unchanged.

² Using Block capitals when posting online comments is generally regarded as a serious offence against netiquette (an equivalent of screaming at the addressee in spoken conversation), so it could be argued that, in such exchanges, it enhances the overall impoliteness effect.

a warning, for example: *be careful when buying things from this seller i got no top or payment back or BEWARE!! – SELLS DAMAGED ITEMS AND DOESNT STATE ON LISTING! VERY CLEVERLY WORDED.* ‘Warn against the seller’ comes across as highly offensive, controversial and impolite.

3.1.3 Accusations: Implicatures

The implicatures conveyed in the accusations can be grouped into three broad categories: the first one is ‘you are dishonest,’ like in: *item did not work as described tried it in 4 phones,* the second one can be labelled ‘you are inefficient’ as in: *Inaccurate description, terrible communication & slow delivery. Don’t recommend,* and the last one can be called ‘you are unavailable’ for example: *Wrong item, no reply to communication regarding resolution.*

3.2 Replies: Classification

In analyzing the replies, I have used the same criteria as those for the negative feedback, that is, their linguistic form, propositional content and, lastly, implicatures that can be drawn from them.

3.2.1 Replies: Linguistic Form

Interestingly, an overwhelming majority of replies apply full sentences, and ‘telegraphic’ answers are quite scarce. Repetition has not been employed here, which might suggest that it is more effective a strategy in accusations than in defending one’s self-face.

3.2.2 Replies: Propositional Content

At this point, two groups of strategies can be detected: self-politeness and impoliteness strategies, which will be discussed in greater detail.

3.2.2.1 Self-Politeness Strategies

In their attempts to save, defend or enhance their self-face, the sellers resort to a variety of tactics and strategies. One of them is quoting terms and conditions of sale (which are usually posted in the sellers’ profiles and have to be studied carefully by the buyer before purchasing the product in order to avoid misunderstandings): *Refunds or replacements always given.* The next popular strategy is quoting the listing of the auction and referring

to the original content and phrasing on the website: *Item was advertised as Faulty-Did not [have] Power On*. Very often, the sellers simply praise and defend the goods, thus denying the accusations issued by the purchasers, like: *Don't be silly ADOR TN is the brand how can it be a copy?* Another interesting tactic is self-praise, or even 'advertising oneself' like mentioning the number or percentage of positive comments achieved by the seller from their previous transactions, for instance: *DONT FORGET 20,836 POSITIVES IN 12 MONTHS* or *See my feedback. 1000 of these sold with no problem*. Also, the sellers have frequently described their actions and efforts put into conducting the transaction appropriately, as in *Customer was refunded on 16th December via original method of payment*. Finally, they defended themselves by quoting third parties involved in resolving the conflict(s): *BUYER WANTED THE ITEM BEFORE PAYMENT CLEARED [and] THE BANK TRIED TO EXPLAIN*, trying to prove that they are not to blame for the faulty transaction.

3.2.2.2 Impoliteness Strategies

There is also a richness of ways in which the sellers strike back and retaliate with impoliteness, many of which are found in Culpeper's paper. The first strategy is 'abuse other,' like in *LIAR AND A CON ARTIST – BEEN REPORTED TO EBAY*. The next one relies on 'scorn and ridicule other', for example: *NON-PAYING BIDDER – VAT IS INCLUDED NOT ADDED, WORKED OUT BACKWARDS – DUMMY*. There are also denials and contradictions, such as *ITEM NOT ADVERTISED AS NEW, IT IS REFURBISHED!!* Another popular impolite strategy is asking a rhetorical question: *HOW CAN WE CHARGE UTWICE ON EBAY?* The sellers express their impoliteness via sarcasm, as in *SENT ITEM 3 TIMES!! MMmmmm SCAMMER MAYBE??* or in *SENT IT TWICE, DID YOU WANT THREE?, CANT BELIEVE TWO DID NO[T] GET THERE*. The last two observable strategies in the replies are 'give other orders' (*Learn to read!!!*) and 'warn against other,' (*2 sims were sent and you leave negative after 2 months. BEWARE OF THIS EBAYER*).

3.2.3 Replies: Implicatures

The implicatures belong to several categories, the first one being 'you are illiterate' as in: *The folder that says garden structures has the GAZEBO'S in [them,] learn to read !!!!!* The second one might be labelled 'you are intellectually challenged (or silly):' *There is a very big sign i[n] red*. The sellers can also implicate that the buyers are dishonest, like in this sarcastic comment: *[you did] get the refund as paypal, but you didn't post back dress,*

want to keep it arenu. Lastly, some sellers implicated that the buyers are capricious, fussy and hard to please, an example of which is a rhetorical question *CANT PLEASE EVERYONE I GUESS?*

3.3 Combinations

Out of the 200 exchanges, I have selected three examples which show the most interesting combinations of self-politeness and other-impoliteness, along with their respective strategies.

3.3.1 Example 1

B: [the sellers] [d]o not correspond to email through ebay. No ins[t]ruction uno[b]tainable web sight

S: Instructions were on product & emailed & I answered you[r] badly worded emails! SAD!

In this exchange, the buyer attempts to present the seller in an unfavourable light by being directly impolite: he criticizes the seemingly faulty customer service and the seller's lack of involvement in conducting the transaction. He strives to portray the seller as unavailable and unhelpful. His opponent, in turn, manages to defend his self-face via the description of the item, and discussing all the effort he had put in doing business with this buyer. The retailer is indirectly impolite: he ridicules the buyer by implicating: 'you did not notice the instruction,' and 'since your spelling is poor, you probably are silly.' Another implicature, stemming from the laconic statement 'sad,' might be that the buyer is pathetic.

3.3.2 Example 2

B: bad service, rude, dishonest, need i say anymore? stay away ebayers!

S: Compulsive liar, as she was too fat to wear the boots not my problem lose weight

Here, the purchaser is directly impolite: she criticizes customer service and she issues a warning against this seller, which is a highly confrontational and grave threat. The seller saves her self-face by defending the goods claiming that her adversary, with her alleged

weight problem, is also responsible for this conflictive situation or misunderstanding. Her rudeness is both direct and indirect: she insults the buyer twice by calling her 'a liar' and 'fat' and orders her to lose weight. Indirectly, she ridicules B and blames her for misconducting the transaction.

3.3.3 Example 3

B: looks like something from the cover of a magazine-NOT gold plated-rubbish

S: THE ITEM DESCRIPTION DISPLAYED IN RED FONT ITEM WAS GOLD PLATED – NEVER AGAIN

In the last altercation, the buyer uses direct impoliteness by explicitly criticising the goods of being fake and of low quality, adding a derogatory term *rubbish*. In turn, the seller defends her self-face defence by firstly quoting the description and, obviously, contradicting the buyer's accusation. She is also indirectly impolite by suggesting that the client might be illiterate or incapable of reading with comprehension, so the implicature could sound: 'you are unable to read, while the rules are all laid down.' Her last, telegraphic remark *Never again* may implicate that the buyer is obnoxious and hard to please, but it also might serve as a warning against doing any business whatsoever with her, and by the same token, an insult as well.

4.0 Conclusions

It has been shown in this paper that self-politeness and other-impoliteness co-occur in interaction: there exists one area of communication where such combinations are possible. One observation worth mentioning is the multiplicity of strategies: they occur more than one at a time and do not conflict with one another at all, which, as Schifffrin notes, is widespread in discourse (76–91). When it comes to direct and indirect impoliteness, a question appears about which of the two is more insulting and face-damaging. On the one hand, direct insults and accusations are more effective here, being straightforward and having some sense of urgency and immediacy about them. On the other hand, veiled and indirect rudeness is more vicious (especially in the case of sarcasm or irony) and could be received as more powerful. This dilemma definitely deserves to be addressed in further analysis. Another puzzling problem is the specificity of context: it is hard

to say with certainty which face aspect, positive or negative face, is more at stake in such exchanges. In this specific context, eBayers could be treated as members of the same community, sharing the same experiences, so such conflicts threaten, of course, their positive face. Simultaneously, many eBay retailers make a living by selling goods online. Therefore, their reputation, reliability and diligence, commonly connected with negative face, are also quite fragile and vulnerable. This data-based researched may have not provided definite answers and solutions in this respect, but hopefully it shows how rich, unpredictable and controversial online verbal conflicts might be.

Works cited

- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Bousfield, Derek. *Impoliteness in Interaction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 2008.
- Chen, Rong. "Self-politeness: A proposal." *Journal of Pragmatics* 33 (2001): 81–106.
- Cherry, Marc. *Desperate Housewives*. ABC Productions, 2005.
- Culpeper, Jonathan. "Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness." *Journal of Pragmatics* 25 (1996): 349–367.
- Grice, Herbert P. "Logic and Conversation." *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*. Ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan. New York: Academic Press, 1975. 41–58.
- Holmes, Janet. "Modifying Illocutionary Force." *Journal of Pragmatics* 8 (1984): 345–365.
- Harris, Sandra. "Being Politically Impolite: Extending Politeness Theory to Adversarial Political Discourse." *Discourse and Society* 12 (4) (2001): 451–472.
- Lachenicht, Lance G. "Aggravating Language: A Study of Abusive and Insulting Language." *International Journal of Human Communication* 13 (4) (1980): 607–688.
- Locher, Miriam A. and Richard J. Watts. "Politeness Theory and Relational Work." *Journal of Politeness Research* 1 (1) (2005): 9–33.
- Schiffrin, Deborah. *Approaches to Discourse*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994.
- Terkourafi, Marina. "Toward a Unified Theory of Politeness, Impoliteness, and Rudeness." *Impoliteness in Language. Studies on Its Interplay with Power in Theory and Practice*. Ed. D. Bousfield and Miriam A. Locher. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. 45–74.
- <www.ebay.co.uk. 23 March 2009. 30 June 2009.>