

Situated Politeness

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Situated Politeness

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Chapter 10

Situated Impoliteness: The Interface between Relational Work and Identity Construction

Miriam A. Locher

1. Introduction

In this chapter I will report on my ongoing research interest in relational work, and *impoliteness* in particular. My interest in impoliteness comes from my research focus on power and politeness in disagreements, where I looked at conflictual data (Locher, 2004). While research on politeness has been going strong since the 1970s, research on impoliteness has only recently picked up momentum, as for example evidenced by the 2006 and 2009 conferences on impoliteness and rudeness in Huddersfield and Lancaster, the special issue of the *Journal of Politeness Research* (Bousfield and Culpeper, 2008), the first monograph on impoliteness (Bousfield, 2008a), and edited collections on rudeness and impoliteness (Gorji, 2007; Bousfield and Locher, 2008). A few early exceptions are Lachenicht (1980), Kienpointner (1997), Culpeper (1996) and Culpeper et al. (2003). Research on impoliteness is motivated by the sociological importance of tackling the perceived increasing problems of blatant rudeness and inconsiderateness which are said to negatively affect public life in Britain, as for example evidenced by Tony Blair's 'respect agenda', and as studied by Jonathan Culpeper (2006) in his ESRC research project on 'Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence'. These topical reasons, along with my interest in the interpersonal side of communication most generally, have led me to return my interest to conflictual behaviour and behaviour that might be deemed rude or impolite.

After briefly addressing the key concepts of relational work and face, I will argue for a merging of research on impoliteness and relational work with research on identity construction in a postmodernist constructivist framework. I believe that these two research areas can be brought together in a meaningful way when we study the social factors that influence the use of situated language. Then I will introduce two general trends in research on impoliteness, that is,



first-order and second-order approaches, before focusing on the discussion of intentions, since these are key in defining politeness and impoliteness in current research. The chapter thus has a primarily theoretical stance, but I will illustrate the theoretical considerations with an example of a computer-mediated conflict on a computer help forum.

2. Relational Work and Face

In Locher and Watts (2008), we argue that

Relational work refers to all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice. (2008: 96)

This general statement sets the stage for claiming that all aspects of relational work should be studied, and indeed that it is also time to focus more on impoliteness and not predominantly on the mitigating aspect of language usage.¹ Impoliteness clearly involves the relational aspect of communication in that social actors negotiate their positions vis-à-vis each other. In this sense, impolite behaviour is *as much* a part of this negotiation as polite versions of behaviour.

At the heart of this understanding of relational work is Goffman's (1967) notion of 'face', which is an important concept for the discussion of identity construction and relational work in general. Goffman defines face as follows:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [or herself] by the line others assume he [or she] has taken during a particular contact. (1967: 5)

Goffman (ibid.: 13) argues that interactions between people are influenced by considerations of face. In other words, people pay attention to 'the line' that others take and can engage in face-enhancing and face-maintaining, but also in face-aggravating (i.e. face-attacking; cf. Tracy, 2008) behaviour. In earlier work I suggested that face can be equated with a 'mask' or a 'role', that is, an image a person gives him- or herself during a particular interaction (Locher, 2004: 52, 2008: 514). The metaphor of the stage is evoked here where people can put on different masks or faces. However, I do not wish to imply that a person can take off such a mask to reveal an underlying 'true' identity, since 'face' is always a construct and there is no face-less communication in the first place (cf. Scollon and Scollon, 2001: 48; Tracy, 1990: 221). Face is not fixed but negotiated in the social practices that interactants engage in. The recurring negotiation of face implies that a person can have several different faces that are situationally emergent. Finally, it is crucial that face depends on others accepting it: the success of constructing and maintaining a face is always also dependent on the person/people an individual is interacting with.

3. Politeness, Impoliteness and Identity Construction

Language is one channel through which social beings express, communicate and, ultimately, negotiate their identities. Other means of expressing identity are, for example, the ways we comport ourselves or the ways we dress. The use of language for enhancing, maintaining and challenging relationships in interpersonal communication has variously been termed *facework* (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987; Tracy, 1990), *identity work* (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005), *rapport management* (Spencer-Oatey, 2005) or, as we suggest, *relational work* (Locher and Watts, 2005).² More generally, I propose that the notion of ‘face’ and ‘mask’ can be linked to an interactant’s understanding of a particular identity that he or she wishes to claim in a specific situation. It is this link that allows us to connect research on identity construction – in the postmodernist sense as ‘the social positioning of self and other’ (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 586) – with research on politeness and impoliteness. It may be desirable for interactants to be perceived as having qualities attributed to their identity such as *polite, elegant, cultured, well-mannered*, and so on, and to avoid being perceived as *rude, impolite* or *stand-offish*. However, as mentioned above, we should not perceive face and identity to be fixed constructs. On the contrary, we should conceptualize them as products, emerging in interaction. This is in line with Bucholtz and Hall’s claim that identity ‘is intersubjectively rather than individually produced and interactionally emergent rather than assigned in an a priori fashion’ (2005: 587). This understanding of identity, which I endorse, differs from some of the other sociolinguistic approaches that primarily described individuals by means of variables such as age, sex, occupation or income. I suggest that we should focus on the emerging construction of face and identity in interaction and that the notion of face can stand for identity construction in more general terms.

This linking of politeness and impoliteness with identity issues is not entirely new. Tracy, for example, points to it in her 1990 and 2008 articles. Further, Swann (2000) reviews several authors who combine research on gender as an aspect of identity with politeness issues, among them Brown (1980), Lakoff (1975) and Holmes (1995). However, the latter studies do not focus on the *construction* of identity and the role that politeness and impoliteness play in this process to the extent I wish to highlight in this chapter. Recently, however, a number of researchers such as Louise Mullany, Stephanie Schnurr, Meredith Marra, Janet Holmes, Karen Tracy, and Helen Spencer-Oatey, to name just a few, have begun to pursue such a line. This chapter contributes towards this direction of research (cf. also Locher, 2008).

4. First-order and Second-order Investigations

In Locher and Bousfield (2008: 3), we note that determining what linguistic utterances are considered impolite and how to define impoliteness as such are

contested in the literature. We argue that the *lowest common denominator* for impoliteness in the literature can be summarized as follows: ‘Impoliteness is behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context’ (Locher and Bousfield, *ibid.*: 3). Most researchers, including myself, would propose that this is ultimately insufficient and some emphasize that further distinctions within face-aggravating behaviour have to be made in order to better capture impoliteness. This discussion is in full swing (cf. Bousfield and Culpeper, 2008; Bousfield, 2010).

In the literature, two main approaches to studying impoliteness and politeness are discernable at the moment. These two types are called first-order and second-order approaches. Within politeness literature this terminology goes back to Watts et al. (1992) and Eelen (2001), and ultimately to the distinction between *emic* and *etic*. Depending on what approach a researcher takes, the subject of study differs. First-order/*emic* concepts are judgments about behaviour, such as *impolite*, *rude*, *polite*, *polished*, made by the social actors themselves. We are, in other words, dealing with a layperson’s understanding of the concepts. Second-order/*etic* approaches use the terms as theoretical concepts or technical terms for linguistic analysis. In what follows, I will briefly introduce one theory as an example of a second-order approach and introduce the discursive approach to politeness and impoliteness studies as an example of a first-order approach.

4.1. Brown and Levinson’s theory

The most prominent and well-known example of a second-order theory is Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987). They worked with three different languages, Tamil, Tzeltal and English, and observed similar patterns in relational work. Here, I will only briefly summarize a few important points for my later discussion. Brown and Levinson treat ‘politeness’ as a universal concept and as a technical term to describe relational work that is carried out to mitigate so-called face-threatening acts. A key term for Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) is *face*, although they use the term differently than just discussed, because they look at face as a relatively static want that people have. In other words, they do not stress the emergent nature of the concept. They argue that ‘face respect is not an unequivocal right’, which means that an interactant’s face is vulnerable (1987: 62). The authors maintain that it is in the interest of both the speaker and the addressee to ‘maintain each other’s face’ (1987: 60). This interest leads interactants to minimize the face threat of an action by means of strategies which differ in their degree of indirectness and mitigation.³ These strategies are chosen according to several factors, notably the degree of the imposition and the distance and power differences between interactants. The authors then claim that politeness plays a role as soon as speakers consider each others’ face and wish to minimize face-threatening acts.

Brown and Levinson (1987) only briefly deal with the possibility that speakers do *not* consider each others' face: They propose that

politeness has to be communicated, and the absence of communicated politeness may, *ceteris paribus*, be taken as the absence of a polite attitude. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5)

This has been read as implying that an absence of politeness constitutes impoliteness – a view that is problematic as we shall see shortly.

There is no doubt that contextual factors play a role in relational work and also that indirectness is often associated with politeness in an Anglo-Western context. Brown and Levinson have also pointed out and discussed an array of linguistic strategies for mitigation that is unprecedented in the literature. However, what I object to is the way in which Brown and Levinson's theory has been understood and used in the past. Generalizations have been made for whole nations of speakers-of-a-language about how they undertake relational work, while I believe that we have to look at language usage on a much more local level and take into account its being situated in interaction – this is also what lies at the heart of Tracy's (2008: 170) 'grounded practical theory'. As a result of this generalization of Brown and Levinson's framework, it is of no relevance whether or not particular members of a social practice also meant or perceived a particular utterance to be *polite* or *impolite*. Finally, I disagree with Brown and Levinson's claim that impoliteness is merely the opposite of politeness and argue for a more fine-grained analysis (cf. Locher, 2006b).

4.2. The discursive approach to studying politeness and impoliteness

First-order researchers explicitly leave open the option that relational work consists of more than just impolite or polite behaviour. We claim that we are dealing with situated judgements by interactants with respect to the appropriateness of relational work in a particular, grounded social practice. This may lead interactants to come up with a more diverse labelling of behaviour than simply polite and impolite, and it may result in aggressive facework being considered appropriate or expected (cf., e.g., the studies by Bousfield, 2008a; Culpeper, 2005; Harris, 2001; Tracy, 2008 for expected conflictual data).

The definition of impoliteness that I propose together with Richard Watts in the edited collection *Impoliteness in Language* therefore reads as follows:

Negatively marked behaviour, that is behaviour that has breached a social norm [. . .], evokes negative evaluations such as *impolite* or *over-polite*, (or any alternative lexeme such as *rude*, *aggressive*, *insulting*, *sarcastic*, etc. depending upon the degree of the violation and the type of conceptualization the inappropriate behaviour is profiled against). (Locher and Watts, 2008: 79)

In addition to saying that impoliteness is face-aggravating behaviour, we stress that terms such as *impolite* or *rude* are evaluative judgements, made by participants in a particular situated social practice and that the behaviour that triggered these judgements is negatively marked with respect to appropriateness. We claim that much of the conceptual space of impoliteness is also shared by other negatively evaluated terms within face-aggravating linguistic behaviour, such as, for example, *rude*, *standoffish*, or *stuck-up*. More empirical research is needed here before we can determine how these concepts differ or overlap.

Let me now return to a crucial aspect of the discursive approach to impoliteness, namely the importance of locally made judgements on the relational aspects of language usage. To claim that context matters is no new insight. What has changed in *politeness research* is our awareness that judgements about the relational aspect of an utterance may differ from one practice to the next.

Consider, for example, the case of swearing. While it may be utterly unacceptable in your family to swear during lunch in front of your grandmother and mother on Mother's day, it may almost go unnoticed in the changing room of your ice-hockey team (cf. Jay and Janschewitz, 2008). On the contrary, in the latter context swearing may be perceived as part of the register used and might be a means to strengthen in-group solidarity. The point is that the same individual who engages in both activities is aware of different norms of appropriateness and adjusts his or her linguistic behaviour accordingly.

It is important to stress that these norms and expectations are acquired in processes of socialization and are subject to change, since they are shaped by the individuals who make up the particular practice. They may overlap to a large extent in many related social practices, but there may also be differences. This discursiveness underlines my preference for a first-order rather than a second-order approach in my own work. Therefore, if we want to study how relational work is judged and perceived by social actors, we also have to study the norms and expectations against which they might make their judgements (cf. Tracy, 2008: 170, 188, on grounded practical theory).

Here we can draw on the notion of 'community of practice' (CoP), as for example employed in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's (1992) research in sociolinguistics. They define CoP as

an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavour. (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992: 95)

Knowledge about norms of behaviour in a particular practice is acquired during socialization and is linked to the activities that people engage in. Judgments of behaviour are made against these norms and expectations. In addition to communities of practice, the notion of 'frame', that is, 'structures of expectation based on past experience' (Tannen, 1993: 53), is a crucial concept to

approach the process of judging, since it explains the basis on which judgments are made:

A frame is acquired over time in social practice when interactants categorize the experiences of similar past situations, or draw conclusions from other people's experiences. A frame can contain expectations about action sequences (such as money transactions in a sales situation), but also about role and identity issues (such as the roles of sales assistant and customer). In Locher and Watts (2008: 78), we point out that '[t]he theoretical basis of "frames" are cognitive conceptualizations of forms of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour that individuals have constructed through their own histories of social practice'. (Locher, 2008: 521–22)

These norms and expectations are acquired over time and are constantly subject to change. This position is supported by Bucholtz and Hall when they discuss the notion of emergence in relation to identity construction. They point out that

the property of emergence does not exclude the possibility that resources for identity work in any given interaction may derive from resources developed in earlier interactions (that is, they may draw on 'structure' – such as ideology, the linguistic system, or the relation between the two). (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 588)

At this moment, it may be a good point in time to stress that I do not claim that people start inventing norms and expectations from scratch every time they meet. Quite the opposite is the case: since people draw on their past experiences, the discursive understanding of impoliteness and politeness stresses the historicity of concepts such as CoPs and frames. Nevertheless, it is possible that the same linguistic behaviour is judged in another way by different groups of people. Mills (2002, 2005), for example, has shown that even the term 'politeness' may carry negative connotations for some groups of people, and it is possible to show shifts in meaning by doing diachronic dictionary analyses of terms such as 'polite' or 'impolite' (cf. Locher, 2008). Further research is needed here to establish what linguistic behaviour is judged in what way by different social groups in situated interaction.

As a final point with respect to norms and expectations, it is of course important to stress that it is *not* always the case that people strive at maintaining or enhancing each other's face. Lachenicht (1980) succinctly argues that

[i]f the purpose of aggravation is to hurt, then means must be chosen that *will* hurt. (1980: 619–20, emphasis in original)

This comment points to the interlocutors' awareness of and orientation to the norms of the interaction in question. It also highlights that interactants could

not play with the level of relational work and adjust it to their own ends if they were not aware of norms of appropriateness. Consider again the example of using swearwords mentioned earlier. If it was your intention to shock and hurt your mother and grandmother on Mother's day, the use of swearwords might indeed be the way to go about it. In contrast, the use of swearwords in your ice-hockey team will probably still go unnoticed and will have no aggravating impact. Since swearwords no longer have a taboo character in this context, you may have to find other means of face-aggravating behaviour.

The next section will elaborate on the role of intentions and will also take up some methodological issues connected to studying interaction in a first-order framework.

5. The Role of Intentions

One direction in both first and second-order research on politeness and impoliteness suggests that the recognition of intentions might be key to distinguishing between 'rude' and 'impolite' behaviour. In Bousfield and Locher (2008), we can find the following three definitions of impoliteness.⁴ Derek Bousfield says that

I take impoliteness as constituting the issuing of *intentionally* gratuitous and conflictive face-threatening acts (FTAs) that are purposefully performed. (2008b: 132, emphasis added)

Jonathan Culpeper maintains that

Impoliteness, as I would define it, involves communicative behaviour *intending* to cause the 'face loss' of a target or perceived by the target to be so. (2008: 36, emphasis added)⁵

In contrast, Terkourafi assigns the recognition of intentions to rude behaviour rather than to impolite behaviour. She argues that

impoliteness occurs when the expression used is not conventionalised relative to the context of occurrence; it threatens the addressee's face (and, through that, the speaker's face) but *no face-threatening intention* is attributed to the speaker by the hearer. (Terkourafi, 2008: 70, emphasis added)

Clearly, more research is needed here to establish whether the recognition of intentions by the interactants involved (speaker, addressee or both) is indeed key to defining impoliteness and rudeness and to distinguishing the terms from each other.⁶ It should be stressed that this is a concern that has been primarily

discussed in connection with the English language. In German, for example, we do not find easily available equivalents for *rude* and *impolite*. In the literature, we thus witness a mixture between discussing the meaning of first-order lexemes of a particular language and discussing theoretical concepts to describe face-aggravating language usage in general. In my opinion, researchers should state more clearly what their research aims are in this connection. If they are interested in first-order understandings of the lexemes, it is certainly valid to look for differentiations between terms. If they are interested in finding useful technical terms to describe ‘relational concerns of language usage’/‘relational work’/‘facework’ across different languages, it may be counter-intuitive to base these notions on the difference between two lexemes that are particular to one specific language. A more neutral technical terminology such as ‘face-enhancing’, ‘face-maintaining’, and ‘face-aggravating/damaging behaviour’ might be the more useful way to go in the latter context (cf. Tracy, 1990; Arundale, 2010).⁷

The special issue of the *Journal of Politeness Research* (Bousfield and Culpeper, 2008) also takes up the issue of intention and its connection to impoliteness. Hutchby (2008), in particular, tackles the methodological issue of how to uncover intentions in interaction – a point that remains a great challenge for researchers.⁸ As a conversation analyst he argues that

[w]ithout denying that speakers can have private intentions, CA states that intentions can in fact be analyzed as an important matter for the participants when they are brought to the surface of interaction. Therefore, to understand impoliteness as a phenomenon in talk-in-interaction, we need to focus on occasions when participants themselves display an orientation to actions as impolite. (Hutchby, 2008: 238)

Far from denying that interactants do have intentions, Hutchby thus argues for paying attention to situations in which breaches of norms become apparent. In the case of internet data, we have the possibility to easily search for the use of lexemes such as *rude* or *impolite*. In many cases these terms are used as parts of meta-comments on interaction in face-to-face situations or on interaction in the computer-mediated world. They are thus meta-comments on the relational aspect of communication and allow us to identify situations in which interactants perceive relational work as having been negatively judged. While these situations are of course not the only instances in which impoliteness or rudeness occur, the meta-comments constitute a window of opportunity for the researcher to tap into the base for such evaluations. In the next section I will discuss such an example.

Finally, from a first-order perspective on English, I would like to add that it may also be the case that some individuals make no first-order distinction between *rude* and *impolite* at all, and may in fact use the expression ‘rude and impolite’ as a collocation. A crude search with Google on English internet sites

reveals that the phrase ‘rude and impolite’ occurs 22,100 times (‘impolite and rude’ appears only 5,310 times). Random examples are listed in (1) and (2):

(1) HP – Rude and impolite⁹

Posted by [Name] under *Customer Experience*

This makes me mad. I’ve got a HP all-in-one printer, scanner copier. All I want it for is to print and scan. On the Mac the printer is plug and play so no messing about with drivers for that. I just need a driver for the scanner. So I insert the disc and find myself having to download 18 applications weighing in at 55 meg. No option to just install the scanning application – I’ve got to take the whole lot, picture editing, the works. Now that is rude, it is impolite [pdf] and it is selfish. If Mr Hewlett and Packard invited me to dinner I would come alone. I wouldn’t bring my family, extended family and assorted hangers on. So why do they think they can gate crash my computer like this.

(2) July 24, 2006 [emphasis added]¹⁰

are we rude and unfriendly?

There was an international poll conducted recently and Malaysians were voted as one of the rudest and most impolite peoples of the world. The local papers put it on the front pages. The Prime Minister released his thoughts and I’m afraid I have to agree. We are quite badly behaved especially to each other. I’ve mentioned before that customer service is a foreign concept and racial harmony is something we only talk about. Tough love? I don’t know. [. . .]

[In response to this post a commentator writes:]

That’s really interesting. I don’t know many Malaysians, but I know you’re not **rude and impolite**. [. . .]

The first example is taken from a blog in which a blogger starts a post on the topic of unwelcome additional software that appears when one starts to install a printer driver. The blogger entitles this thread ‘rude and impolite’ and then refers to the described behaviour as ‘rude’, ‘impolite’, and ‘selfish’ – all clearly negative terms. In addition, the poster makes an analogy to appropriate conduct in interpersonal face-to-face interaction connected to a dinner invitation. Example (2) is a comment on a thread in which a blogger expresses concern about Malaysians being described as ‘one of the rudest and most impolite peoples of the world’. In a reaction to this post, a commentator argues that Malaysians are ‘not rude and impolite’. Again, we also witness further adjectives being employed, such as ‘rude and unfriendly’ in the title of the thread.

Admittedly, the overall hits of 22,100 for ‘rude and impolite’ (see Table 10.1) is far smaller than for the adjective ‘rude’ and its derivatives on their own, which occur 34 million times, or ‘impolite’ and its derivatives, which appear 2.2 million

Table 10.1 The occurrence of 'rude' and 'impolite' on English internet sites and in the British National Corpus (BNC) and the Time Magazine corpus¹¹

	Google: site hits (Aug. 2008)	BNC: word hits	Time Magazine: word hits (Aug. 2008)
'impolite'	2.2 million	55	66
'impolitely'	60,000	2	15
'impoliteness'	58,500	2	7
'rude and impolite'	22,100	0	0
'rude'	33.4 million	990	825
'rudely'	2.2 million	128	281
'rudeness'	2.5 million	102	107

times and thus far less frequently than 'rude' (cf. also Bousfield and Culpeper, 2008: 163; and Watts, 2008: 289, who make similar observations). However, the phrase 'rude and impolite' occurs together often enough to deserve further research. The ranking of these frequencies is confirmed by the British National Corpus and the Time Magazine corpus – neither of which shows hits for the phrase 'rude and impolite' – and it would be worthwhile to investigate in which contexts which lexeme occurs to gain a better understanding of their situated usage (Table 10.1).

In the next section I will give an example of a case in which the lexemes 'rude and impolite' are used in combination.

6. Discussion of Example: An Online Technical Computer-support Forum

To illustrate the connection between considerations of relational work, identity construction and norms and expectations, I have chosen one example from an internet forum on computer problems. This forum provides free technical computer support and is run on a volunteer basis.

In an Anglo-Western context, the exchange of seeking help and giving advice is a tricky business with respect to face issues, as I have pointed out in my work on advice columns (Locher, 2006a; Locher and Hoffmann, 2006). Hutchby maintains that because advice-giving 'involves a speaker assuming some deficit in the knowledge state of a recipient, advice-giving is an activity which assumes or establishes an asymmetry between the participants' (1995: 221). This asymmetry with respect to expertise may be perceived as threatening. It is therefore of interest to see how the interactants negotiate their roles as advice-seeker and advice-giver.

The site from which the example was taken was accessed in May 2007. The five posts that I am going to look at were posted within a time frame of only two

and a half hours and involve an exchange between two individuals that occurred in 2005 on an asynchronous forum:¹²

- the *Advice-seeker* is the person with a technical problem. He is marked as a ‘distinguished member’. According to information on the site, this means that he has more than 2,000 postings. His chosen picture, his avatar, is that of a male Japanese anime character.
- the *Advisor* is the person who answers the *Advice-seeker*’s question. He is marked as a ‘senior member’, which means that he has ‘at least 100 posts, but fewer than 2,000’. His chosen avatar is that of a cat with a gun.

According to these profiles which are visible in the posts, we can assume that both interactants are computer-savvy, with the *Advice-seeker* being the more experienced member. I will refer to both interactants with the male pronoun, since their user names or avatars seem to propose a male role. Non-standard typographical usage has been left unchanged in all the examples:

(3) 8-Oct-2005 09:43 PM – **FireFox; Can not install theme**¹³

[*Advice-seeker*]

I found a great theme that would go with the rest of my colorschemes. However, I am having problems installing it. Opening it in firefox does nothing. Here is where I got the JAR file: [URL]

Notice that the *Advice-seeker* is very matter of fact and does not use an explicit linguistic request for help. He seems to assume that the context of the help forum sufficiently marks his post as a request. Only a short while later he obtains an answer from the *Advisor*:

(4) 08-Oct-2005 10:15 PM

[*Advisor*]

Usually when you click on a link to install a theme, Firefox displays a dialog asking you for permission to install the theme. You can chose to allow the download and installation or to cancel the process. (This info from the FF Help menu.)

Also, you might want to look in Tools, Themes and see if this theme is listed and needs to have “Use theme” checked. Also, after installing theme, you probably need to restart FF.

To have no errors
 Would be life without meaning.
 No struggle, no joy.

The *Advisor* responds after having consulted the Firefox help menu, as indicated in the brackets. Richardson (2003: 172) calls this a ‘warranting strategy’, because the *Advisor* legitimizes his contribution by indicating an authoritative source. In the second paragraph, the *Advisor* gives a general hint as to how to find more information. Notice that the *Advisor* uses hedges for his instructions both to save his own and his addressee’s face: ‘usually’, the expression ‘you might want to’, and ‘probably’. The *Advisor*’s signature is also noticeable, since it adds to his identity construction in the sense that it presents a personality tolerant of mistakes.

For those not initiated in the technicalities of the problem, this response might seem to be fairly to the point at first sight. However, the reaction that this post receives from the *Advice-seeker* shows otherwise:

(5) 08–Oct–2005 10:24 PM

[*Advice-seeker*]

Come on, I am not a moron.

Yes, that is what usually happens. But the actual download is a ZIP file, as shown on the website I posted in my above post. Once downloaded and extracted, I attempt to open the JAR file with firefox. Only Firefox will not open the file.

Read all information in someones post before trying to answer please.

www.simplytux.net

I no longer have the patience to help those that would rather follow the crowd then think for themselves. I have no time for sheep.

The tone in the *Advice-seeker*’s response is clearly no longer neutral. In his first contribution ‘Come on, I am not a moron’, the *Advice-seeker* reveals that he felt insulted by the *Advisor*’s answer. Clearly his identity as a ‘distinguished member’, and hence as someone with a relatively large amount of experience, leads to his feeling attacked by the *Advisor*, whom he feels has provided him with a response anyone who spent a few moments looking at the help function of Firefox could have produced.

In the second paragraph, the *Advice-seeker* explains the problem he encountered further and thus gives the *Advisor* more context. In his last sentence before the signature, ‘Read all information in someones post before trying to answer please.’, the *Advice-seeker* again engages in face-aggravating behaviour since he attacks the *Advisor*’s face by implying that the *Advisor* has not done a proper job in reading the post carefully and checking the facts before responding. While it is possible to consider the use of ‘please’ as a softener, it is equally likely that it might be interpreted as condescending in the context of the

unambiguous face-threat of the message. In a face-to-face encounter, prosody might help to disambiguate the use of ‘please’, but in this computer-mediated context this means is not available and it will depend on the recipients/readers how they interpret it.¹⁴

The *Advice-seeker* has now added a signature line that gives a reference to his own forum on Linux support and that ends with a motto. The motto presents him as an independent thinker and the reference to his Linux forum enforces his expert identity – despite the fact, of course, that he is the one with the question.

The very same night, the *Advisor* responds and highlights two aspects: the relational and the informational, as can be seen in (6):

(6) 09–Oct–2005 12:35 AM [emphasis in original]

[*Advisor*]

You may not be a moron, but you are certainly rude and impolite. With that attitude you will be lucky to ever get any help. Btw, if you are so smart, why didn't you post your question on the Mozilla Firefox forum?

I am sure you already know this but I found this in the FF forum:

themes are actually jar's, not xpi's. but, for extensions, u can do file>open file. then select the xpi and it prompts to install. for extensions and themes, u can click and drag the xpi/jar into the extension/theme manager, and it prompts to install. or for extensions and **themes, u can put the xpi/jar in the extension folder in ur profile**, and it will prompt to install on the next firefox start.

and this: **Try dropping the jar file in your extensions folder of your profile folder. Then close and restart Fx.** You should get a dialog box about whether or not you want to install the theme. You should also be able to drag it from local disk to the theme manager with no problem

To have no errors

Would be life without meaning.

No struggle, no joy.

The *Advisor's* response in the first paragraph in (6) contains the comments ‘rude and impolite’. So here we have an instance where the two lexemes occur together. This is evidence on a meta-level that expectations of appropriate behaviour have been violated. The *Advisor's* sentences in the first paragraph are all face-threatening and constitute a counter-attack. Especially the sentence starting with ‘BTW, if you are so smart’ is an immediate reaction to the *Advice-seeker's* claim to an expert identity, which serves to deny the *Advisor* that status.

After this face-aggravating behaviour, the *Advisor* launches into two paragraphs in which he tackles the technical problem that the *Advice-seeker* wants

solved. In doing so, the *Advisor* demonstrates that he is no moron either and reclaims expert status. The introductory sentence to this information ‘I am sure you already know this’ is ambiguous. It could be read sarcastically and as a continuation of the face-aggravating stance. In contrast, it could also be read as an indirect compliment, which acknowledges the *Advice-seeker’s* expert status, and which might function as an offer to move the relational level of the exchange to a less heated tone. In what follows we see that the *Advisor* spent more time investigating the problem and he offers further help. This can be interpreted as a move to ‘reconciliation’, which would favour the second reading of the introductory sentence. Like this the *Advisor* appears to work on creating a relationship of symmetry rather than asymmetry with respect to expertise.

There is one more comment in the exchange, which is presented here in several chunks (7a–7c). Once more it explicitly tackles both the relational as well as the informational aspect of the response. In the first part, the *Advice-seeker* reacts to the accusation of having been ‘rude and impolite’ as follows:

(7a) 09–Oct–2005 01:35 AM

[*Advice-seeker*]

Quote:

Originally Posted by [*Advisor*]

You may not be a moron, but you are certainly rude and impolite.

I find it incredibly rude and impolite to to simply post a cookie cutter answer to a problem based on a few key words instead of reading the entire problem and diagnosing it. Any corporation-type E-mail Techsupport can do that. This forum was created to help people, not spew pre-typed answers that may or may not answer the problem.

Here, the *Advice-seeker* turns the *Advisor’s* accusation around and places it firmly in the *Advisor’s* court. He quotes the *Advisor’s* attack and then, by explicitly referring to the *raison d’être* of the forum, the *Advice-seeker* makes it clear that the *Advisor’s* answer fell short of the ethics and high quality that the forum promises (cf. Herring, 1999, 2007 on quoting). The content of the original response thus violated the *Advice-seeker’s* expectations with respect to norms of quality, and I would argue, also on the level of identity construction, as explained above.

The *Advice-seeker* then takes up the *Advisor’s* second reproach and responds in a detached fashion without referring to the face-threat as such:

(7b) Quote:

Originally Posted by [*Advisor*]

Btw, if you are so smart, why didn’t you post your question on the Mozilla Firefox forum?

Because [name of forum] does not have a FireFox Forum. And if you are talking about the Mozilazine Forums, I would rather not sign up for a different forum every single time I have a small problem with a single program. It is pointless when [name of forum] handles everything.

By answering in this way, the *Advice-seeker* makes the claim that his initial request was a reasonable one. Indirectly this implies of course that he also should have received an adequate answer.

Finally, the *Advice-seeker* moves to the informational part of the *Advisor's* last post:

(7c) Quote: [emphasis added]

Originally Posted by [*Advisor*]
*for extensions and themes, u can click and drag the xpi/jar into the extension/
 theme manager*

I did not know this. The only ways I knew to install a theme was to A) Click on a link for a theme install or B) File > Open File. For some reason B was not working, but dragging the JAR into the theme manager worked. **Thank you for that information.**

The extra information about placing the files in the profile folder **is also usefull. I will have to remember that. Thanx**

BTW: If I have offended you, dont feel bad. I have that effect on everybody. Realy, just ask [Name of moderator].

www.simplytux.net

I no longer have the patience to help those that would rather follow the crowd then think for themselves. I have no time for sheep.

What is of interest to us here is that the *Advice-seeker* explicitly recognizes the usefulness of the *Advisor's* information several times and acknowledges that the *Advisor* worked out a solution for him that he had not thought of himself. These instances are highlighted in bold in (7c). The *Advice-seeker* thus restores the *Advisor's* expert status to a certain extent, after having so severely criticized him in the same post in (7a).

Finally, the *Advice-seeker* finishes on an interpersonal note by returning explicitly to the face-aggravating character of the exchange: 'BTW: If I have offended you, dont feel bad. I have that effect on everybody. Realy, just ask [Name of moderator]'. While this is not yet exactly an apology, it highlights that the *Advice-seeker* is willing to share responsibility for the face-threatening character

of the exchange. The post thus ends on a conciliatory note. This will to conciliate may have been spurred on by the *Advisor's* demonstration that he, too, is willing to reconcile. This underlines the importance of the immediate context for analysis and the fact that identities are situated and negotiated in interaction.

7. Conclusion

I am not claiming that impoliteness or rudeness only occurs when we can find meta-comments by the interactants involved. More often than not, people who feel offended will probably not comment on this directly to their interlocutors. However, methodologically these comments provide a short-cut by helping us realize that face-aggravating behaviour has indeed occurred, that is, that norms and expectations have been perceived as having been breached by the interactants involved in a particular social practice.

Looking more closely at the internet forum from which the examples were taken reveals that there is an awareness of relational work that is quite often explicitly commented on. These types of forums, where interactants do not necessarily know each other personally and have to negotiate their status only by means of typed verbal interactions, provide fascinating data on how norms and expectations are discursively negotiated and how this is linked to the interactants' understanding of their respective roles and identities, in combination with the site's purpose and ideology.

A more in-depth analysis of examples such as the one presented on internet interaction will also have to include considerations of the specific context of the internet in more detail. For example, it is likely that the same exchange between the *Advice-seeker* and the *Advisor* might have turned out differently if it had not been publicly available for others to read. In other words, the posters are not only trying to construct their expert identity vis-à-vis each other, but also vis-à-vis the wider readership (cf. Baym, 1996).

It will also be of interest to see how this part of the forum compares to other areas of the site where the same interactants can communicate about non-computer related issues and where 'expertise' is maybe less of an issue. (Participants of the computer forum have in fact created a space where they are clearly constructing a group identity beyond the task-related exchange of advice by, for example, celebrating birthdays and exchanging holiday pictures.)

A further point of interest with respect to identity construction and relational work on such internet sites is to study the published rules of conduct or so-called netiquette, as Graham (2008) has done for a mailing list. These rules document the expectations that interactants have about appropriate conduct. There is, of course, no guarantee that these rules are followed, but they give us a valuable insight into the conception of frames and the related norms and expectations that people discuss explicitly. The *Advice-seeker*, for

example, is well aware of the rules of the forum, as can be seen in an exchange between him and the moderator of the technical forum, in which he quotes the moderator's comment on his use of language:

(8) Quote:

Originally Posted by [Name of the moderator]

And PLEASE, watch your language

☹️ Huh? What did I say? I have never posted a swear word without editing it so that it is no longer offensive, I am very careful about that.

Here the *Advice-seeker* and the moderator are implicitly referring to and clearly orienting to the following rule, which is part of the rules of conduct posted on this site:

Category III Offenses

Intentional Offenses

Crude or Rude Intent – [name of forum] was designed to be a community of people who can help one-another, and should be completely free of any profanity and vulgar language. There is absolutely no excuse for being rude to a user. Uncivilized and offensive language (especially cursing of any sort), images, or anything else, used anywhere on the board (including your user name) is completely unacceptable.

What I hope to have shown in this chapter is that the discursive approach to concepts such as impoliteness and politeness and the modern view of identity as emerging in interaction can be fruitfully combined in linguistic research which explores interpersonal communication. We can locate the overlap in the approaches by claiming that there is no communication without a relational aspect and, as Bucholtz and Hall maintain, that 'identity is inherently relational' (2005: 605). Furthermore, both the approach to identity and the discursive approach to politeness and impoliteness highlight the importance of practice and situatedness.

It remains to be emphasized quite clearly that much more empirical research is needed to understand the intricacies of relational work in all its facets and to determine in what ways it influences linguistic variation on both an individual and a CoP level. As a next step I propose that it is worthwhile to investigate meta-comments on relational work in naturally occurring data (both face-to-face and computer-mediated) more systematically in order to study how interactants negotiate the interface between relational work and identity construction.

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Notes

- ¹ Studies that followed a Brown and Levinson (1987) approach to politeness research often primarily focused on the linguistic expression of face-threat avoidance.
- ² See Locher (2008) for a discussion of these terms. The main point here is that all of these concepts deal with the interpersonal side of language usage. To pursue this point further, the *Handbook of Interpersonal Pragmatics* (Locher and Graham, 2010) focuses especially on this interpersonal aspect of communication, including the study of polite as well as impolite interaction.
- ³ Brown and Levinson (1987: 60) list two main categories ('do the FTA', 'don't do the FTA') and distinguish between off record (indirectness) and on record ('without redressive action, baldly'; 'with redressive action, positive politeness'; 'with redressive action, negative politeness') strategies.
- ⁴ Bousfield, Culpeper and Terkourafi discuss these definitions of impoliteness together with definitions of rudeness in the respective chapters in Bousfield and Locher (2008).
- ⁵ It has to be mentioned, however, that Culpeper stresses that at the time of writing, he had not yet been able to empirically establish a difference with respect to the recognition of intentions between the terms rudeness and impoliteness.
- ⁶ Compare Bousfield (2010), who continues to give the recognition of intentions a key place in his attempt to differentiate between politeness and rudeness in English.
- ⁷ In his approach, Arundale (2010) in fact speaks of Face Constituting Theory rather than Politeness Theory.
- ⁸ Angouri and Tseliga (2010: 58) state that '[w]hile early work foregrounded the importance of the speakers' intentions and focused on the analysis of, often decontextualized, individual utterances, more recently emphasis has been placed on the importance of context and on the negotiation and co-construction of meaning between the two parties involved (i.e. the speaker and the hearer)'
- ⁹ Permission to quote granted by blogger. Available at: www.dancingmango.com/blog/2008/06/02/hp-rude-and-impolite/ (accessed 18 August 2008).
- ¹⁰ Permission to quote granted by blogger. Available at: <http://kualalumpurdaily-photo.blogspot.com/2006/07/are-we-rude-and-unfriendly.html> (accessed 18 August 2008).
- ¹¹ Available at: <http://corpus.byd.edu./time>.
- ¹² Accessed on 12 May, 2007. The site's webmaster has given me permission to quote this particular exchange.
- ¹³ A theme is comparable to a style sheet and JAR stands for Java ARchive.
- ¹⁴ We have here one example showing that the same linguistic expression can fulfill very different functions, which will always also be related to the context in which they occur (cf. Locher and Watts, 2005: 16).

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