

## Intercultural impoliteness

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### Abstract

The paper argues that impoliteness may work differently in intercultural interactions than in L1 communication. Most researchers (cf. [Bousfield, 2008](#); [Culpeper, 2009, 2010](#); [Haugh, 2011](#)) analyzing impoliteness within one language seem to agree that no act is inherently impolite, and that such a condition depends on the context or speech situation that affects interpretation. This may not be quite so when interlocutors use not their L1 but another language as the medium of communication.

It is hypothesized that the priority of semantic analyzability of an utterance for nonnative speakers and their L1-based prior experience in meaning processing has a profound effect on how politeness/impoliteness is processed. As a result, the polite or impolite load of expressions and utterances may be lost or an evaluative polite/impolite function may emerge where it should not. Focusing on propositional meanings interlocutors may sometimes be unaware of impoliteness because it is conveyed implicitly or through paralinguistic means that function differently for speakers with different L1 backgrounds.

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### 1. Introduction

Research on politeness has been in the center of attention of pragmatics and discourse studies since [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#). However, impoliteness research has become popular only recently. Researchers have been working on describing how this phenomenon is manifested in different languages (cf. [Bousfield, 2008](#); [Culpeper, 2005](#); [Culpeper et al., 2010](#)). This work has been quite extensive and led to promising results. However, researchers have paid little attention to impoliteness in intercultural settings, which is the focus of this paper.

[Culpeper \(2005: 38\)](#) suggested that we should use Tracy and Tracy's definition of impoliteness ([1998: 227](#)): "communicative acts perceived by members of a social community (and often intended by speakers) to be purposefully offensive". This definition is important from the perspective of intercultural communication because it refers to "members of a social community". Other researchers such as [Eelen \(2001\)](#), [Mills \(2003\)](#), and [Watts \(2003\)](#) use the term 'communities of practice'. [Kádár and Haugh \(2013\)](#) use the term 'relational network' (which is different from 'communities of practice'). All these researchers refer to some kind of relatively constant language communities. However, interlocutors in intercultural interactions hardly make up a "social community" or "community of practice" in the traditional sense of the expressions. The "social community" in which lingua franca is used as a means of communication is usually just temporary. Interlocutors can rely on factors such as common beliefs, cultural models, community norms, etc. only to a limited extent in these temporary speech communities of lingua franca. But there is some evidence that even in this kind of communities there is a strong tendency for interlocutors to co-construct some kind of norms of their own, no matter how

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much time their members spend together (e.g. [Kecske, 2007, 2013, 2015](#)). These temporary conventions and norms are quite loose and vague in comparison to norms in traditional language communities (or whatever other term we use). The more time members of a speech community spend together the more norms of conduct they develop for themselves. For instance, a Russian speaker who spends long period(s) of time in an English speaking country will develop a “feel” for, say, American English speaker relative norms of im/politeness. Or in lingua franca setting, if, for example, members of an international committee spend long time together they can also develop special “norms” for communicating with each other. Consequently, the emphasis is on time spent together and the inherent endeavor to develop some norms and expectations of their own in the process of becoming a speech community. This process is very similar in all speech communities no matter what their content is (L1–L1; L2–L1; lingua franca, etc.).

Analyzing impoliteness in intercultural interactions the question we need to ask is as follows: Will a person, with, let us say, a Spanish L1, sound polite enough or impolite to a, for instance, Chinese speaker when they use English as a lingua franca? Will the Chinese speaker of English consider the utterance of the Spanish speaker impolite or polite enough in English? Will the actual situational context help the interlocutors process the utterance appropriately as polite or impolite?

To demonstrate the problem I will use an excerpt from a dialog noted at Fuzhou Airport between a Chinese waitress and an Australian traveler who was sitting at a table talking to two other travelers and drinking beer and coffee and eating something ([Kecske, 2013](#): 200).

- (1) Chinese: - Can I get you some more coffee, sir?
- Australian: - *Who is stopping you?*
- Chinese: - You want to stop me?
- Australian: - Oh no, just bring me the damned coffee.

The expression “*who is stopping you?*” used by the Australian tourist in this actual situational context sounded very rude according to the norms of most varieties of the English language. Based on his facial expression the Australian did not seem to be teasing. However, the Chinese waitress did not seem to realize how rude the Australian was. Her face showed surprise and confusion. She might have been misled by the literal meaning of the expression, which, however, hardly fitted into the actual situation context. If she relied on the literal meaning of the expression she may not have found the utterance rude according to her limited L2 (English) cultural models and expectations. This means that the rudeness/impoliteness of the utterance may have been lost in this interaction. The actual situational context did not help the Chinese waitress to process the utterance properly. I asked her later if she realized how rude the Australian tourist had been. She said she did not think he had been rude. The example shows what problems nonnative speakers may face when they produce and process impolite or polite utterances in intercultural settings.

## 2. The discursive turn in im/politeness research

There is no space for me here to review the literature on im/politeness research so I will focus only on the discursive turn in politeness/impoliteness research ([Eelen, 2001; Haugh, 2007; Locher, 2012; Watts, 2003](#)) which has special relevance for intercultural pragmatics because it puts emphasis on individual evaluation of politeness/impoliteness ([Kecske, 2013](#)). Criticizing theories of politeness [Eelen \(2001\)](#) and [Watts \(2003\)](#) argued that a theory of politeness cannot develop without a radical re-conceptualization of politeness that involves a shift away from politeness as an abstract theoretical concept toward members’ evaluative practices as found in their natural environment in everyday discourse. [Eelen \(2001: 247–248\)](#) said that politeness research should focus on the processes of constructing social reality and evaluations of politeness as particular representations of reality. Based on this argument [Watts \(2003: 19–20\)](#) redefined the goal of politeness research as follows: “What a theory of politeness should be able to do is to locate possible realizations of polite and impolite behavior and offer a way of assessing of how the members themselves may have evaluated that behavior.” According to [Haugh \(2007\)](#) this requires researchers to examine more carefully how (im)politeness is interactionally achieved through the evaluations of self and other (or their respective groups) that emerge in the sequential unfolding of interaction. So the analyst should look for “evidence in the interaction that such (im)politeness evaluations have been made by the participants, either through explicit comments made by participants in the course of the interaction (less commonly), or through the reciprocation of concern evident in the adjacent placement of expressions of concern relevant to the norms invoked in that particular interaction (more commonly)” ([Haugh, 2007: 301](#)).

The aim of the discursive approach is not to describe and explain what linguistic expressions are going to sound (im) polite, or (in)appropriate, and why, but how the interlocutors arrive at their evaluations of their partners’ behavior, and why. This means that the focus is on evaluation, and on how people react to their conversational partners’ behavior. As shown in example (1) the expression “*who is stopping you?*” is theoretically rude but practically, for the Chinese waitress in that particular context, the expression did not sound impolite. This highlights the importance of individual evaluation.

From the perspective of intercultural interaction the discursive approach has two important things to offer. First of all, in this approach, analysis happens on the discourse level, and one of the main arguments is that it is the speaker rather than the utterance that is impolite or polite. Why is this important for intercultural communication? Because, as I said above, in intercultural interactions speakers cannot rely on existing norms, standards and conventions the way they do in L1 communication. They either just do not exist in those interactions or they are only present to a limited extent. It means that there is much less contextual support for interlocutors in intercultural interactions than in L1 communication.

Just like the socio-cognitive approach (Kecske, 2010, 2013) in pragmatics the discursive approach emphasizes the importance of both individual and social factors. It relies on the notion of *communities of practice* (cf. Wenger, 1998) (several similar notions mentioned above such as ‘social community’, ‘relational network’, etc.) that has been widely used lately in several other fields including sociolinguistics, second language acquisition and bi- and multilingualism. This notion focuses on language practices and styles developed by groups of people as they engage in a common task. Analyzing these practices the researcher is expected to identify the norms of appropriateness for a given community of practice and then assess a given utterance as polite or impolite against those norms. However, the analyst’s interpretation as an outsider might not always coincide with that of participants’ themselves (see example (1) above). So the analyst has to look for cues such as explicit comments made by interlocutors in the course of the interaction, or the reciprocation of concern that is evident in the adjacent placement of expressions of concern relevant to the norms invoked in that particular interaction. Intercultural interactions with participants representing different L1s can be considered *temporary communities of practice* or temporary social communities or whatever other terms we use. (The emphasis here is on “temporary”.) In these temporary speech communities prior norms, expectations, frames, familiar contexts may be very limited and may need to be co-constructed if time or circumstances of interaction(s) allow. This is why there is more “burden” on the individual than on the socio-cultural, normative, frame-based factors.

However, when analyzing intercultural interactions we need to be cautious about the role of frames and the role of actual situational context (Kecske, 2013). Terkourafi (2005, 2009) proposed a frame-based approach according to which specific linguistic expressions should be analyzed in their particular contexts of use (i.e. frames). She said that it is “the regular co-occurrence of particular types of context and particular linguistic expressions as the unchallenged realizations of particular acts that create the perception of politeness” (2005: 248). Terkourafi (2009: 23) emphasized the constitutive role of the (actual situational) context that creates a frame for the participants to evaluate what is polite. As her focus is on politeness, she concentrates on statistical regularities of usage: “politeness is not a matter of rational calculation, but of habits” (2005: 250). She also argued that “Empirically, frames take the form of observable regularities of usage” (2001: 185). Analyzing Terkourafi’s approach Culpeper (2010: 3232) asked the questions: “Could conventionalised impoliteness formulae have the same basis as that argued for politeness formulae? Are they conventionalised frequency correlations between forms and particular contexts?” His argument was that impoliteness cannot be adequately treated that way. I agree with Culpeper’s assessment. Referring to Leech he argued that impoliteness formulae are much less frequent than politeness formulae. Leech (1983: 105) stated that “conflictive illocutions tend, thankfully, to be rather marginal to human linguistic behaviour in normal circumstances”. Another important difference between politeness and impoliteness expressions was pointed out by Watts: “Behaviours and expressions considered impolite are more noticed and discussed than politeness (Watts, 2003: 5).” People talk about impoliteness but are not necessarily engaged in impoliteness. As Culpeper (2010: 3238) said “... there is an interesting point of difference with politeness formulae is that people acquire a knowledge of impoliteness formulae that far exceeds their own direct experience of usage of formulae associated with impolite effects in such contexts. This, I argue, is because they also draw upon indirect experience, and in particular metadiscourse.”

### **3. What is considered impolite in intercultural interactions?**

In the debate presented above there are two important points for intercultural impoliteness. First, neither politeness nor impoliteness can work in intercultural interactions as Terkourafi described.

Referring to politeness as “habits” (Terkourafi, 2005: 250) she emphasized the constitutive role of the (actual situational) context that creates a frame for the participants to evaluate what is polite. She also claimed that empirically, frames take the form of observable regularities of usage” (Terkourafi, 2001: 185). This claim can hardly be used for intercultural politeness or impoliteness where there is almost no reoccurrence and no regularity of usage. So the mechanism that helps evaluation in L1 communication is non-existing. Second, it is important to note that something can be conventionalized not just through “frequency-in-context”. There are other factors that may play an important role in conventionalization of any linguistic unit in a language. These factors include (but are not restricted to) familiarity, functional importance, psychological salience and something I call “resonance” which refers to affecting someone in a personal or emotional way. Consequently, to be familiar with an impoliteness formulae does not necessarily require frequent and direct prior contextual experience. One can get to know the “norm” not only through direct prior experience but also indirectly, through hearsay, observation, etc. This is an important factor for intercultural interactants because

there is no easy answer to the question: whose im/politeness norms to follow when participating in an intercultural interaction? For instance, when a Spanish person is speaking with a Chinese person in English, whose norms will define what is considered im/polite? The obvious answer would be English norms but in fact this is hardly what happens as we will see in some of the examples below. Besides, there is the additional issue that Culpeper raised in connection with impoliteness formulae: No direct prior experience is needed to be familiar with what is considered impolite in a given speech community. Living in that community, members can get to know what is impolite through indirect means. However, this chance is very limited for nonnative speakers.

L1 communication is characterized by the relatively balanced presence of both regularity and variety. However, what we see in intercultural interactions is a shift toward variety with much less regularity present. This gives rise of importance of individual factors over social factors. As a consequence there are two factors that seem to affect what an interlocutor considers impolite in intercultural interactions when English is the medium of communication: (1) familiarity with impoliteness formulae in the target language (English) and (2) individual evaluation.

If interlocutors are familiar with an impolite formulae in English and one of them uses it, most of the time no problem occurs. See the following exchange between a Turkish student and a Russian student illustrates this point (Kecske, 2013).

- (2) Ali: - Sasha, come with me to the library.
- Sasha: - Sorry, I cannot. I need to finish this essay.
- Ali: - You really need to come. Peg will also be there.
- Sasha: - *Knock it off, will you?* Don't you see that I am kind of busy?
- Ali: - Okay, okay, just chill.

The Russian student used the expression “*Knock it off, will you?*” which is quite rude by American English norms, and this is how the Turkish student processed it. Both students were familiar with the impolite load of the expression in American English, so there was no escalation of conflict. Although Sasha's expression does seem to carry a possible “escalatory” or even “aggressive” attitude, Ali attempts to deescalate the conflict by asking Sasha to “chill”. In other words, Ali recognizes the possible emotional/aggressive load of Sasha's prior utterance and responds by attempting to calm him down. Both are familiar with the socio-cultural load of the expression and act accordingly: no escalation of conflict because of the Ali's appropriate response.

If, however, not each interlocutor is familiar with the impolite load of a formulae, misunderstanding may occur. This is what is happening in example (3) in which a Japanese student, Emiko is talking to an American student, Melody (Kecske, 2013: 14).

- (3) E: - Melody, I have received the travel grant.
- M: - *Nooou, get out of here!*
- E: - You should not be rude. I did get it.
- M: - OK, I was not rude, just happy for you.

The Japanese student processed the expression ‘get out of here’ literally although it is clear that if processed that way, the literal sense of the expression does not match the actual situational context. The interesting thing is that not even the intonation and enthusiasm of Melody helped the Japanese student process the expression properly. All actual situation contextual factors were overridden by the student's prior experience with the use of ‘get out of here’ (which was probably literal) and the strong semantic analyzability of the expression. Unlike in L1 communication, the actual situational context does not really seem to support the nonnative speaker to catch the impolite load of an expression.

This leads us to the issue of individual evaluation. What does the individual speaker consider impolite in the intercultural interaction? Current research has shown that in intercultural communication nonnative speakers very often prioritize the compositional meaning of an utterance (Abel, 2003; Bortfeld, 2002; Cieślicka, 2006; House, 2002; Kecske, 2007). The priority of literal meaning for nonnative speakers in meaning processing may have a profound effect on how impoliteness is processed. As a result, the polite or impolite load of the expressions and utterances may be lost or an evaluative polite/impolite function may emerge where it should not. We saw an example for the first case at the beginning of the chapter. The Chinese waitress did not recognize the rudeness of the Australian traveler when he asked ‘Who is stopping you?’ as the waitress offered him more coffee. The waitress processed the utterance literally but she seemed to be confused because it did not make sense for her in that actual situational context. So the actual situational context caused confusion rather than clarification because the rudeness of the expression was lost as the waitress could not process it properly.

Individual evaluation of impoliteness in intercultural interactions depends on several factors such as priority of literal meaning in language processing, familiarity with the impoliteness formulae in the target language and impoliteness norms

in the L1 of the interlocutor. Further research is needed to explore the interplay of these factors in spontaneous intercultural interactions.

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