Marta Dynel

Being cooperatively (im)polite: Grice’s model in the context of (im)politeness theories

1 Introduction

Grice (1989a [1975], 1989b [1978], 1989c) is widely known to have launched one of the most important pragmatic models of conversation, which can be applied to all forms of human communication (e.g. speeches, letters or advertisements). In his seminal lecture published as an article, Grice (1989a [1975]) propounds the Cooperative Principle (CP) and several subordinate maxims captured under four categories (Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner), the flouting (overt violation) of which gives rise to (conversational) implicatures (Grice’s neologism for “implying”, commonly used in reference to the meaning implied). The model of conversation based on the CP, together with the notion of speaker/utterer meaning (Grice 1957 [1989d]), provides the backdrop for a large proportion of the pragmatic literature on politeness, both the well-entrenched theories (Lakoff 1973, 1977, 1989; Leech 1983, 2003, 2005; Brown and Levinson 1987, 1987¹) and more recent developments (e.g. Haugh 2002, 2007; Pfister 2010); as well as the complementary impoliteness² frameworks (e.g. Lachenicht 1980; Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2008, 2011; Culpeper et al. 2003; Bousfield 2008a, 2008b, 2010).

As will be shown here, the literature on (im)politeness is replete with controversial claims consequent upon the authors’ misinterpretations of the Gricean philosophy. In addition, inspired by Grice’s notions of implicature and maxims, authors offer debatable extensions regarding politeness, notably politeness as invariably couched in implicitness (not Grice’s what is said, which is equal to speaker-intended literal/explicit meaning), politeness as implicature, and a politeness maxim. With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Fraser 1990, 2005; Braun 1988; Held 1992; Watts 1992a; Terkourafi 2003; Bousfield 2008a; Dynel 2009b),

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¹ Brown and Levinson’s 1978 article was published as a book in 1987. However, it is only the monograph that is henceforth referred to here.
² Given the notion of speaker meaning endorsed here, the present focus is on impoliteness, but not (unintended) rudeness (Culpeper 1996, 2005, 2008, 2011; Bousfield 2008a, 2008b, 2010). For a different view, see Terkourafi (2008).
authors rarely address the inadequacies in (im)politeness literature related to the Gricean framework.

This paper aims to tease out the problematic interdependence between the Gricean model of communication and the literature on politeness and impoliteness which draws on it. It will be argued that some (im)politeness researchers’ postulates tend to be anchored in unfounded interpretations and modifications of the Gricean account. Consequently, it is postulated that (im)politeness can be viewed in the light of Grice’s original work on communicative rationality and intentionality, which underlie literal/explicit or implicit meanings.

2 (Im)politeness in the light of cooperation and rationality

Many a theoretical problem arises from (im)politeness researchers’ misinterpreting the notion of the Cooperative Principle. Contrary to the folk understanding of the word, the technical term “cooperation” put forward by Grice should be understood as interlocutors’ rationality, which is a prerequisite for the success of their communicative exchanges (Davies 2000, 2007; Dynel 2008, 2009a). The Gricean philosophical framework concerns prototypical, that is successful, conversation (and other forms of communication, cf. Dynel 2010), not accounting for communicative failures, which can occur even if interactants are rational and, thereby, cooperative. Grice’s cooperation resides primarily in logic and communicative rationality, laying foundations for rational and intention-based communication. This view has been frequently misunderstood. In response to other researchers’ unsubstantiated criticism of his work, Grice (1989c: 369, quoted later in this section) feels the need to explicate that it is only rationality that he has aimed to discuss in the context of the CP.

Essentially, the fundamental tenet underpinning the CP is that the speaker and the hearer are rational language users (Grandy and Warner 1986), which is also their mutual presumption. Specifically, the hearer to a given utterance holds a view that the speaker is rational and that a logical interpretation of this utterance is to be sought, even if it should flout maxims, thus being couched in implicitness. On the other hand, the speaker produces an utterance and invites the hearer’s understanding, trusting that the latter will infer the meaning accordingly. Therefore, communicative rationality does not necessitate that the speaker should produce only literal utterances free from implicitness. Cooperation, hence, does not entail the speaker’s benevolence or the avoidance of imposition on the hearer. It is not the case that for the sake of efficiency, the speaker needs to refrain
Brown and Levinson (1987) tacitly assume that the CP is premised on rationality, as originally posited by Grice, but state that maxims are “guidelines for achieving maximally efficient communication” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 95), whereas politeness is “a major source of deviation from such rational efficiency” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 95). Firstly, hardly cogent is Brown and Levinson’s suggestion that politeness must always capitalise on maxim floutings (see Section 4), even if some of those are indeed produced for the sake of politeness. Secondly, the postulate that politeness (or maxim flouting in general) is inefficient is scarcely well-founded. Rational efficient communication should not be equated with literal means of expression and lack of implicature, whilst politeness can be carried by what is said or implicature. Additionally, the authors state that politeness requires “rational explanation on the part of the recipient who finds in considerations of politeness reasons for the speaker’s apparent irrationality or inefficiency” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 4). A similar misinterpretation of the Gricean model as predicated on efficiency (between cooperative, rather than aggressive, participants) can also be found in a paper by Pfister, who insists that the maxim of politeness he proposes (cf. Section 6) “is not conceptually tied to maximally efficient exchange of information and rational conversation [materialised by following Grice’s maxims], but it is conceptually tied to rational conversation among potentially aggressive parties” (2010: 1277). On the strength of these quotations, it emerges that the authors hold the opinion that the Gricean model and politeness have two distinct goals, even if they are not mutually exclusive per se and both operate on rationality. Brown and Levinson (1987) and Pfister (2010) imply that politeness entails apparent irrationality or inefficiency on the speaker’s part. The hearer must rationally infer the polite speaker’s intended meaning, which is only apparently “irrational”. However, it is sensible to assume that, in ordinary/prototypical situations, the speaker is rational even if he/she is polite or potentially aggressive. Interestingly, Brown and Levinson do see an intrinsic paradox in the fact that politeness entails “the speaker’s apparent irrationality” (1987: 4) and simultaneously “a dash of rationality” (1987: 55). This paradox is entirely due to their ill-judged claim concerning the ambivalent notion “rational efficiency” as the cornerstone of the Gricean framework. While the CP is indeed inherently associated with interlocutors’ rationality, it legitimises maxim floutings as the grounds for implicature. The Gricean model is not geared towards communicative efficiency, whether understood as literal expression (what is said) subject to an easy inferential process or richly informative communication.

Conversation, in accordance with the CP, is not centred on conveying information, as Lakoff (1973, 1977, 1989) and Terkourafi (2008) mistakenly state. In
other words, the Gricean rationality model is not reliant on the stipulation that the main reason for communication is the exchange of informative content (see Dynel 2008, 2009a). A similar problem arises in Leech’s (1983) work. He appears to misinterpret the CP, holding a social goal sharing view of it (Bousfield 2008a). Leech asserts that the CP “has the function of regulating what we say so that it contributes to some assumed illocutionary or discoursal goal(s)” (Leech 1983: 82). Nevertheless, the CP is not pertinent solely to clearly delineated discoursal goals (such as to convey particular information). Having found himself misunderstood, Grice (1989c) clarifies that irrespective of whether the aim of a conversation is specified or whether it is indeterminate, the CP will invariably obtain. Goals are very broadly conceptualised and may also be second-order ones, as in the case of a casual chitchat, in which “each party should, for the time being, identify himself with the transitory interests of the other” (Grice 1989a [1975]: 29). The model does, therefore, encompass interactions produced as the Malinowskian phatic communication merely in order that politeness routines should be completed, with practically no informative content being conveyed.

In turn, Watts (1992a, 2003) notes that politeness theories (Lakoff 1973, 1977, 1989; Leech 1983, 2003, 2005; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) pivot on a misunderstanding of the Gricean model, taking “the principle of optimal cooperation” as “the controlling principle”, while it is only “an ideal state of communicative cooperation”, against which “participants in interaction are able to evaluate deviations from that principle” (Watts 1992a: xxxvi). This observation may engender doubts, though. Taking the Gricean model as their departure point is by no means a methodological problem of politeness conceptualisations (on condition that the authors interpret the model correctly). Contrary to what Watts suggests, participants in an interaction neither contravene nor deviate from the CP, which is invariably in operation, as long as they are rational. This misinterpretation is also manifest in Watts’s (2003: 203) claim that “there’s an inherent contradiction […]: polite language is a form of cooperative behaviour but does not seem to abide by Grice’s Cooperative Principle”. By the same token, according to Culpeper, “departures form Gricean cooperation in no way imply departure from polite, social cooperation; in fact, in the classic politeness theory perspective, departures from Gricean cooperation can be motivated by the wish to maintain polite, social cooperation” (2008: 24). Such fallacious claims (see also Leech (1983)) stem from the authors’ misunderstanding of Grice’s “cooperation” as a rule that can be regularly disregarded for the sake of politeness. It must again be stressed that it is not the case that deviations from, not to mention violations of, the CP are possible, since the principle always holds unchanged among rational communicators (while it is the maxims that may be, and frequently are, flouted to generate implied meanings). This is why little support can be given to Culpeper’s
(2011: 158) claim that “the operation of the Cooperative Principle will depend on the context. For example, what counts as a clear and straightforward expression will partly depend on the genre of which it is a part.” It is indeed the case that different genres of discourse and communicative contexts will manifest their peculiarities in terms of maxims’ use, for example in relation to implicitness. One may find Culpeper’s (2011) claim indefensible, given that the CP, which boils down to rationality, (ideally) operates the same way across contexts, whilst it is the are flouted or observed.

As transpires from the discussion above, politeness researchers frequently perceive politeness as diverting from the CP, rather than viewing the latter as a principle of rationality underpinning polite communication. Locher (2004) is yet another researcher nurturing this misguided belief. Revisiting Leech’s (1983) work, Locher (2004: 65) uses the concept “violation of the CP”, which Leech does not actually mention. CP violation would be tantamount to irrationality, something Grice (1989a [1975]) does not allow for in his idealised picture of communication (see Dynel 2009a). In essence, politeness, if an intentional and rational activity, does not violate the CP. Sharing a similar view, but also misinterpreting Grice’s original proposal, Kallia (2004, 2007) and Kingwell (1993) suggest extending Grice’s view of rationality so that it captures politeness. Actually, each of such proposals is more of an explication rather than an extension, given Grice’s all-encompassing definition of cooperation as rationality.

Watts labours under a misapprehension in recognising, as does Leech (1983), the Gricean cooperation as social goal sharing. This misinterpretation has a bearing on the impoliteness framework. Watts (2003: 20) postulates that in impoliteness, which invalidates the statement that “all interaction is geared towards cooperation”, “we are prepared to abandon the Gricean assumption of cooperation”. Similarly, Culpeper (2005) ventures to claim untenably that being impolite, the speaker is not “cooperative in Grice’s (1975) sense” (Culpeper 2005: 44; but see Culpeper 2011). Indeed, impoliteness is frequently associated with non-cooperative behaviour (Kienpointner 1997, 2008; Garces-Conejos Blitvich 2009, 2010). For instance, Kienpointner (2008: 245) describes impoliteness as “non-cooperative or competitive communicative behaviour” which disrupts interpersonal relationships, and “creates or maintains an emotional atmosphere of mutual irreverence and antipathy.” Nonetheless, this non-cooperativeness should be understood literally, not as being at odds with Grice’s cooperation, that is rationality, underlying his principle.

Mullany (2008) rightly acknowledges that impoliteness is rational but, when motivating this, provides argumentation which displays her misunderstanding of the Gricean model. From her perspective, accusations that impoliteness is rare or irrational
are a consequence of traditional Brown and Levinson-influenced models of conflict-avoidance, due to their reliance on Grice’s (1975) co-operative principle. Engaging in impolite behaviour is perfectly rational, and is far more ‘normal’ than is predicted by Gricean-based theories of human communication (Kienpointner 1997, Culpeper et al 2003). (Mullany 2008: 236)

What must be emphasised again is that the Gricean approach does not disallow, and even naturally embraces, conflicts, disagreements and quarrels, which do show “at least a mutually accepted direction” (Grice 1989a [1975]: 26) and which frequently manifest impoliteness. As Lumsden (2008) observes, Grice (1989a [1975]: 26) seems to suggest that normally extralinguistic cooperation comes into force when referring to “a common purpose of a set of purposes”, but if it should be absent, linguistic cooperation suffices (cf. “a mutually accepted direction”). The CP can be deemed as promoting “linguistic goal sharing”, as Thomas (1986) and Bousfield (2008a) suggest, or “linguistic cooperation” (Lumsden 2008) even if the interlocutors’ objectives or roles at a given moment are complementary opposites (e.g. reproaching and being reproached, or interrupting and being interrupted). Similarly, after Culpeper (2011: 157) states: “Of course, it may seem absolute nonsense to apply a ‘co-operative’ principle to data that are strikingly uncooperative”, thereby subscribing to the opinion that the Gricean cooperation should be equated with the folk definition of the word; he seems to concede to the view that linguistic cooperation needs to be distinguished from extralinguistic/social cooperation (a dichotomy which is here considered redundant) and that either suffices as the grounds for communication according to the CP. Nonetheless, a quotation from the “Retrospective epilogue” bears as the best testament to the conclusion that the CP embraces impoliteness, for example arguments or conflict talk, not because of the underpinning cooperation, but because of the rationality of (im)polite conduct:

One source of trouble has perhaps been that it has been felt that even in the talk-exchanges of civilized people browbeating disputation and conversational sharp practice are far too common to be offenses against the fundamental dictates of conversational practice. (...) so, nothing which I say should be regarded as bearing upon the suitability or unsuitability of particular issues for conversational exploration; it is the rationality or irrationality of conversational conduct which I have been concerned to track down rather than any more general characterization of conversational adequacy. (Grice 1989c: 369)

On the whole, it is not the matter of the subtypes of cooperation (Thomas 1986; Bousfield 2008a; Lumsden 2008) that is central to the thesis that the CP captures impolite talk but rather the notion of rationality that is germane to all communication, whether polite or impolite.
In conclusion, politeness is a rational communicative behaviour which exhibits no incongruity with the CP (Kingwell 1993, Burt 1999), and the same holds true for impoliteness. Both polite and impolite utterances conform to the CP, hinged on interlocutors’ mutual assumption of rationality in their communication (Terkourafi 2005b). Rightly, Terkourafi (2008) argues that all communication is based on the CP and facework, both of which rest on rationality. However, the faulty assumption that politeness is contingent on violation of, or at least departure from, the CP is the springboard for the need to introduce a Politeness Principle, which is complimentary to, and even mutually exclusive with, Grice’s principle.

2.1 Cooperative Principle (and conversational maxims) vis-à-vis Politeness Principle (and its maxims)

Lakoff’s (1973, 1977, 1989) approach to politeness displays a number of inconsistencies. She regards Grice’s notion of the Cooperative Principle as being insufficient and argues in favour of the Politeness Principle as an indispensable appendage, whose aim is “to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff 1989: 64). Moreover, Lakoff champions two rules of pragmatic competence: “be clear” (which embraces the Gricean CP and maxims) and “be polite”, which usually (but not always) conflict with each other. Additionally, depending on relationship types and contextual factors, Lakoff distinguishes three sub-maxims of the “be polite” competence,³ viz. R1 Formality/Distance: don’t impose or remain aloof, R2 Deference: give options, and R3 Camaraderie: show sympathy (by acting as equal with the addressee and making him/her feel good).

First of all, this proposal of an alternative principle is premised on Lakoff’s ill-advised claim that while the CP is geared towards conveying information, the PP is focused on social issues. This dichotomisation of goals is misguided, since the Gricean principle does not exclude communicative goals other than relaying informative messages and holds for phatic language use as well, as discussed above.

Secondly, Lakoff subsumes clarity (which, in her view, is tantamount to following the Gricean maxims) under the “don’t impose” rule, arguing that “we can look at the rules of conversations as subcases of Rule 1: their purpose is to get the message communicated in the shortest time with the least difficulty, that is to avoid imposition at the addressee” (Lakoff 1973: 303). This indicates the author’s misconception of the Gricean framework as if it focused on information convey-

³ Lakoff’s parlance changes in the span of over one and a half decades, which is why alternative terms are provided here.
ance with minimal processing costs incurred by the hearer. Another problem is that Lakoff (1973) perceives one of the two rules of politeness which she contrives as being superior to the Gricean maxims which she refers to as “rules of conversations”. It transpires that Lakoff (1973) fails to appreciate that maxims capture the nature of communication in general and can be legitimately flouted, politeness phenomena regardless.

Thirdly, Lakoff (1973) states that the PP usually supersedes the Gricean principle and maxims in informal encounters (R3), while the latter model obtains for cases of formality (R1). This untenable statement leads to the conclusion that the applicability of Grice’s model (which she fails to see as being pivoted on rationality) is context-dependent and manifest primarily in formal encounters vis-à-vis informal ones, with R2’s status being left unexplained. Additionally, Lakoff (1973) implicates that politeness/Grice’s model in formal contexts (R1) cannot involve indirectness, given that the Gricean maxims are followed there, in contrast to informal situations, where indirectness is prevalent. It cannot be denied that politeness will present itself differently in different relationships and situations, yet it is not the case that politeness infringes the Gricean communicative rationality, which is an all-encompassing concept.

Finally, Lakoff (1975: 75) asserts that women are preoccupied with indirectness, which is correlated with politeness (cf. Section 4), while men are guided in their communicative strategy by informativeness, thereby suggesting that the choice between the CP and the PP is gender-dependent. If one appreciates the essence of the CP, Lakoff’s statement appears to indicate that women are, by nature, irrational, which Lakoff cannot possibly wish to suggest. Whether the differences in gendered idiolects are so sharp is another problem addressed in more rigorously conducted linguistic gender studies.

Leech (1983, 2003, 2005) also juxtaposes his Politeness Principle (together with its subordinate maxims), later renamed as the Grand Strategy of Politeness, with the Gricean Cooperative Principle. Mistakenly perceiving the CP as orientated towards the conveyance of meaning, Leech (1983) formulates the Politeness Principle (PP) and argues that “the PP has a higher regulative role than this: to maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place” (Leech 1983: 82). Leech hence avers that his PP controls the CP in that it facilitates social interactions and cooperation. Moreover, Leech claims that the Politeness Principle “rescues the CP from serious trouble” (Leech 1983: 80) and is its “a necessary complement” (Leech 1983: 80) explaining phenomena that, from his viewpoint, cannot be subsumed under the CP, inasmuch as it fails to explain “why people are often so indirect in conveying what they mean” (Leech 1983: 80). This reveals Leech’s faulty understanding of the Gricean model, which does account for, and
is actually focused on implicatures emerging from maxim floutings on the understanding that the CP holds. Failing to appreciate this, Leech (1983: 82) attests that the speaker may “blatantly” break “a maxim of the CP in order to uphold the PP”. Based on this tenuous postulate, Leech (1983) provides examples of maxim “breaches”, which may be deemed as regular maxim floutings yielding implicatures (motivated, among others, by politeness-related intentions), which are by no means mutually exclusive with the CP, a principle that invariably obtains in communication.

Leech (1983) transparently misunderstands the Gricean cooperation as being synonymous with the folk/dictionary understanding of the word. Contrary to what Leech suggests, interlocutors need not always be “friendly” or even benevolently cooperative but still abide by the CP. Although participants in an interaction have a common immediate aim, their ultimate respective aims may be “independent and even in conflict” (Grice 1989a [1975]: 29, 1989c). Interestingly, politeness as such does not need to entail interactants’ full agreement or friendliness (e.g. a professional exchange between business adversaries). Politeness may reside in mitigation strategies underlying verbal acts which are inherently face-threatening.

On the whole, Grice’s CP is an unchangeable presumption, which is operative in all interpersonal encounters (with a few exceptions when interlocutors are not rational), while politeness is socially controlled and can be violated. The speaker may be rational and, therefore, cooperative in the Gricean sense, without necessarily being polite, and even being patently impolite. Thus, Leech is misguided in assuming that interlocutors’ politeness regulates, and is superior to, their conversational rationality. Finally, an emerging question is if all interactions and utterances therein can actually be assessed for their (im)politeness value (e.g. a teacher delivering a lecture devoid of any references to the students). Beyond a shadow of a doubt, all social encounters are guided by etiquette norms, most of which are taken for granted and will be consciously observed in first order politeness, which concerns lay language users’ perspective (for the distinction between first and second order approach, see Watts et al. 1992; Watts 1992a, 2003; Eelen 2001), only if breached (cf. Kasper 1990; Fraser 1990, 2005; Jary 1998). Also, many interactions or utterances can hardly be considered politeness-orientated, but rather politic, i.e. appropriate (cf. Watts 1989, 1992a, 1992b).

Overall, both Lakoff (1973, 1977, 1989) and Leech (1983, 2003, 2005) view their Politeness Principles as being mutually exclusive with the Gricean CP and its subordinate maxims, for they fail to acknowledge the sense of the Gricean cooperation and the legitimacy of maxim floutings, whether or not giving rise to (im)politeness (see Section 4). Whilst a distinct principle of politeness (coupled with its subordinate maxims) might be a useful theoretical tool for politeness
researchers, it is nothing but otiose when conceptualised in contrast to the CP. Incidentally, isolating a separate principle of politeness might necessitate infinite proliferation of principles for various phenomena, which are easily captured by the CP (Brown and Levinson 1987).

3 Speaker-intended meaning and (im)politeness

Grice’s (1989d [1957]) notion of utterer’s meaning or speaker meaning appears to have an impact on those (im)politeness researchers who emphasise the importance the speaker’s intention when communicating meanings and/or the hearer’s recognition of it (e.g. Culpeper et al. 2003; Culpeper 2005, 2008, 2011; Bousfield 2008a, 2008b, 2010). Some researchers, however, argue that intention recognition is irrelevant and that discourse is co-constructed by interlocutors (Terkourafi 2005b, Locher and Watts 2008, Haugh 2007), which is understandable given that intentions cannot be probed with full certainty. What is also of relevance in determining (im)politeness is the hearer’s perception of the speaker’s communicative intention. In the first order approach, this even takes priority over the speaker’s actual intention, in Locher and Watts’s (2008) view. In defence of the advocates of (im)politeness based on the speaker’s intention, it can be said that hearers need not consciously determine speakers’ intentions (and their intentions to have those recognised, cf. Grice’s notion of reflexivity) before gleaning meanings, but usually take it for granted that the meanings they infer are indeed speaker-intended.

This is related to the problem of a priori vs. post factum intention. Brown and Levinson’s (1987), as well as Leech’s (1983), work is premised on the Gricean notion of the speaker’s a priori intention (Culpeper 2011), that is intention that exists before he/she produces an utterance. A priori intention tends to be superseded in the literature by its post facto counterpart (Haugh 2008, Culpeper 2011). This concept captures cases when interlocutors use the notion of intention explanatorily, accounting for their utterances and actions, especially in the case of communication troubles or alleged violation of politeness norms (Haugh 2008).

The hotly debated issue of reflexivity aside (see Dynel 2010), speaker meaning may be interpreted as serving intentional and rational communicative purposes and as lying at the heart of the CP model. To reformulate, the Gricean notion of cooperation is equivalent to the speaker’s rationality, which necessitates intentionality (Davies 2000, 2007; Dynel 2009a, 2010). On the assumption that the CP holds, the hearer computes literal meanings and implicatures, by making ratio-
nal inferences, based on his/her (tacit) recognition of the speaker’s communicative intentions. The hearer receives communicated messages, which he/she (subconsciously) considers to be speaker-intended, albeit recruiting conventional meanings of words.

Rooted in the Gricean framework, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model also centres on the speaker’s intention (see Section 5), and thus it implicitly adopts the notion of speaker meaning. However, the detailed list of substrategies indicates that the authors ascribe conventional meanings to them, the speaker’s particular communicative intention notwithstanding. On the other hand, Culpeper et al. (2003) rightly emphasise that their impoliteness strategies are dependent on context and the speaker’s intentions (see also Bousfield 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Culpeper 2011). Nevertheless, Culpeper’s model runs the risk of being perceived as encoded in language, as it is grounded in the inversion of Brown and Levinson’s framework (Mills 2005; Bell 2009).

On the whole, no linguistic form invariably carries politeness or impoliteness (cf. Fraser and Nolen 1981; Watts 2003; Locher 2004; Locher and Watts 2005; Mills 2005). However, it cannot be denied that certain forms of expression are commonly associated with politeness or impoliteness, especially in the first order approach (Bousfield 2010; Culpeper 2010). For instance, thanking is normally associated with politeness, but it may also be used with a sarcastically ironic undertone for the sake of impoliteness. On the other hand, taboo words are most frequently regarded as impolite, whilst they may actually be deployed to foster humour and testify to solidarity politeness (Dynel 2011 forth). Whether particular instances of conventional formulae subscribe to the salient patterns or less typical uses must be judged individually in the light of particular speakers’ intentions.

4 (Im)politeness and indirectness/implicitness

In the literature on (im)politeness, the term “indirectness” is used in reference to what may be called “implicitness”. Technically speaking, the latter term seems preferable, since it is relevant to the Gricean account, whilst indirectness is associated with Speech Act Theory, in which it pertains to conveying one act by means of another (e.g. the assertive, “I’m thirsty”, may perform the role of the request,

4 Also, some of the strategies provoke serious misgivings. For instance it is hardly conceivable that irony conveying criticism should be recognised as a politeness strategy, as Brown and Levinson (1987: 222) suggest, for the face-threat frequently appears to be exacerbated rather than mitigated, owing to the irony deployed.
“Bring me a glass of water, please”). Nonetheless, in the literature overview presented in this article, the cited researchers’ terminology is employed, while the term “implicitness” occurs in the present authors’ comments.

As already indicated, Lakoff (1973) views politeness as originating in non-clarity, that is indirectness, which is contrasted with clarity, allegedly underlying the Gricean model, in which implicitness actually enjoys a high status. Although Lakoff rightly attests that if a Gricean maxim is not followed, interpreters seek a plausible explanation in politeness (yet, as is argued here, not a separate principle), it cannot be assumed that politeness is the sole reason for/result of maxim non-observance, for implicatures may not be motivated by politeness, while politeness may also be based on literal means of expression. The same misinterpretation inheres in Lakoff and Ide’s (2005: 8) claim concerning the alleged interdependence between politeness and indirectness, as well as its advantage over clarity of expression. In their words, “in many types of discourse politeness-based implicature supersedes clarity-based Maxim-adherence (...) when faced with a choice between clarity and politeness, people normally opt in favor of the latter. That suggests that politeness is not just a superficial addition to a grammar in which directness (i.e., non-politeness) is basic” (Lakoff and Ide 2005: 8). Lakoff and Ide (2005) wrongly juxtapose and contrast politeness, which, in their opinion, coincides with indirectness, with clarity stemming from maxim fulfilment. Also, that language users in general (should) choose implicatures geared towards politeness, rather than explicitness (allegedly inherently offensive, but actually basic in human communication), appears to be an unsubstantiated generalisation, which shows also in another quotation from Lakoff: “it is more important in a conversation to avoid offense than to achieve clarity” (Lakoff 1973: 297). Clarity, understood as literal means of expression, need not involve any offensiveness, whilst impoliteness may also reside in implicitness. Also, besides etiquette norms, it depends on a particular speaker (and contextual factors) whether he/she wants primarily to convey an unmitigated message or avoid potential offence (e.g. by giving up the clarity of expression).

Leech (1983, 2003, 2005) also argues that politeness is associated with indirectness, as it decreases the feeling of imposition on the hearer. Nevertheless, Leech (1983: 171) himself notes that indirectness may lead to more face-threat, and thus to impoliteness. Incidentally, Leech’s (1983: 171) example of a customs officer’s question, “Haven’t you something to declare?”, appears to be indicative of decreasing politeness, yet not necessarily impoliteness, as Leech suggests. This is because it can hardly be perceived as an overtly aggressive attack on the hearer, as the prevailing definitions of impoliteness hold.

As already hinted at (see Section 2), Brown and Levinson’s (1987) conceptualisation of politeness is centred on implicitness. Brown and Levinson (1987:
95) assert that politeness necessarily depends on maxim floutings, which suggests that implicitness is actually necessary for politeness to arise. Surprisingly enough, while Brown and Levinson associate politeness with the specious notion of "deviation from rational efficiency" and thus "indirectness", or rather implicitness (which always depends on maxim floutings), they present only one super-strategy of politeness, that is going off record, as entailing maxim floutings. Brown and Levinson (1987: 69, 94) posit that the strategy of doing an act baldly on record, i.e. without any redress, is tantamount to "speaking in conformity with Grice’s Maxims (Grice 1975)" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 94), whereas going off record coincides with maxim nonfulfilment.⁵ The off-record strategy is employed when the face-threat is extreme, and yet the speaker does not refrain from issuing it. Brown and Levinson (1987) associate this politeness strategy with implicitness engendered by floutings of conversational maxims. By contrast, the bald-on-record strategy can be employed in situations where the speaker is powerful or where not much face is at stake, for instance in cases when maximum efficiency is needed (in the state of emergency). It must be noted that in some circumstances, the bald-on-record strategy may still be conceived as a manifestation of politeness. Incidentally, in first order politeness, on-record utterances (e.g. a mother ordering a child to eat dinner, or a customs officer asking passengers to form a queue) stand little chance of being found polite by ordinary language users, but will not count as impoliteness, either.

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⁵ Another problem is that redressive action via positive and negative politeness strategies can also be materialised by flouting or following Grice’s maxims, while off-record strategies are also face-directed. In other words, both negative and positive politeness may be communicated literally (on record), i.e. by means of what is said, or implicitly (off record) by dint of implicatures consequent upon floutings (cf. Bousfield 2008 for impoliteness). This methodological shortcoming (the overlap in the taxonomy) results from the fact that Brown and Levinson’s (1987) super-strategies are based on two unrelated criteria (observing/flouting the Gricean maxims and face orientation) and, consequently, are not indiscrete (see also Strecker 1988, Bousfield 2008). Brown and Levinson do concede that they “may have been in error to set up the three super-strategies, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record, as ranked unidimensionally to achieve mutual exclusivity” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 18) and that there is a “possibility that the off-record strategy is independent of, and co-occurrent with, the other two super-strategies is something which definitely requires closer investigation” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 21). Modelled on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness framework, the first two classifications of impoliteness strategies (Lachenicht 1980, Culpeper et al. 2003) suffer from the same methodological problem as Brown and Levinson’s account in that they merge two criteria: face address and implicitness/literalness, whilst negative and positive impoliteness strategies can also entail literalness or implicitness. Rightly, Bousfield (2008) conflates strategies introduced by Culpeper and co-researchers under on-record and off-record impoliteness, depending on whether it is performed by implicitness or literal means, respectively.
A claim that politeness inheres in implicitness does not tally with their general model of the five superstrategies of performing face-threatening acts. A question arises as to whether politeness is only implemented by going off record or whether it also includes the other strategies. Arundale (2005) observes that many authors misinterpret Brown and Levinson by failing to observe that the latter ascribe politeness only to implicitness, namely going off record. However, this is an untenable line of defence, insofar as the remaining strategies of performing face-threatening acts are also presented as realisations of politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson 1987: 91). The model then manifests an internal contradiction (see also Section 5).

Overall, politeness need not be associated with implicatures or implicitness, frequently referred to, thanks to Brown and Levinson (1987), as “going off record” in (im)politeness research (e.g. Blum-Kulka 1987, 1990, 1992; Fraser 1990; Turner 2003; Culpeper et al. 2003; Locher 2004; Bousfield 2008a), with impoliteness rendered via implied meanings being the most striking example. Obviously, implicatures may indeed be grounded in politeness, for speakers may flout maxims with a view to mitigating the face-threatening force underlying their utterances. Nevertheless, a speaker may be polite but produce a literal utterance (a case in point being formulaic expressions, such as: “Thank you” or “You’re welcome”). Even beyond such formulaic expressions, straightforward and blunt statements may sometimes coincide with politeness, which is what happens when the on-record strategy is used in the case of minimal face-threat in certain contexts, e.g. a woman may bluntly tell her friend who is trying a dress on, “This dress does not become you.”, which may be interpreted as a display of solidarity politeness and the speaker’s care about the friend’s positive face, notwithstanding the form of this verbalisation. This is in tune with what Dillard et al. (1997) point to when discussing the correspondence between literalness and perceived politeness in close relationships.

In addition, implicitness is not a homogenous construct, but it is divided into conventional and unconventional subtypes and it shows degrees (cf. Holtgraves 2002). Following Blum-Kulka (1987), one may distinguish between conventional and unconventional indirectness. Admittedly, while the latter is typically associated with politeness, the former need not be perceived as polite but neutral, at least on the level of first order politeness. Moreover, implicitness which does coincide with politeness shows cross-cultural differences (see e.g. Blum-Kulka 1987; Marti 2006; Ogiermann 2009). Thus, users of different languages may make utterances displaying different levels of implicitness, being considered polite in one culture, yet less polite or even impolite when interpreted by language users from a different culture.
Finally, implicitness may be associated with impoliteness rather than politeness. Culpeper et al. (2003) and Culpeper (2005) rightly observe that higher implicitness (e.g. when hurling abuse) may sometimes exhibit more impoliteness. For example, sarcastic irony intensifies the force of criticism (“Your idea is just brilliant!” vs. “Your idea is silly!”). Impoliteness may then reside in both literal and implicit means of expression. Similarly to politeness formulae, irrespective of their (non-)literalness, impolite expressions may be conventionalised, as reflected by Culpeper’s (2010) concept of contextually conventionalised impoliteness formulae, which need not be dependent on people’s first-hand experience but knowledge of impoliteness metadiscourse.

In conclusion, the (im)politeness of each implicit or explicit verbalisation must be judged in isolation. Based on a particular context, interlocutors’ relationship and the speaker’s intention, one utterance may communicate a literal meaning (what is said) or an implicature, with either of them showing different relationships to (im)politeness issues. For instance, “Aren’t you cute?” may carry several (im)polite meanings. When uttered by a woman to a toddler in a pram, this is a polite conventionally implicit compliment (literally, “What a cute baby!”) addressed to the child and directed primarily to his/her mother (cf. Dynel 2012 forth). On the other hand, the same utterance may carry an implied meaning related to the speaker’s jocular criticism (“Your being silly, but it’s somewhat cute.”) if it serves as a young man’s reaction to his fiancée’s blunder. Even if implicitly critical and face-threatening, this utterance subscribes to solidarity politeness. Thirdly, the same utterance may act as a manager’s reply to a question, “What shall I do now?”, posed by a woman who has just been dismissed from her secretarial post. The abrupt and unequivocally impolite reply conveys the implied meaning that she might perform a job which entails exploiting her physical appearance (e.g. being a stripper).

4.1 Flouting maxims

A problem related to implicitness concerns Brown and Levinson’s (1987) proposal regarding the means by which implicatures arise. The Gricean implicatures, including those motivated by politeness, rest on the assumption that maxims are flouted, while the CP invariably holds. Incidentally, failing to recognise this, Lakoff (1973, 1977, 1989) and Leech (1983) (see Section 2.1) view politeness as being mutually exclusive with the Gricean interpretative model of communication. Brown and Levinson (1987) do appreciate the process of implicatures’ emergence. However, rather than admit that maxims are legitimately flouted under
their off-record strategy (as well as any other strategies involving implicitness), while the CP invariably holds, they aver:

It is only because they [maxims] are still assumed to be in operation that addressees are forced to do the inferential work that establishes the underlying intended message and the (polite or other) source of departure – in short, to find an implicature, i.e. an inference generated by precisely this assumption. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 95)

Brown and Levinson (1987) thus unduly change the status of maxims to principles which always obtain. Moreover, in their view, off-record politeness conflates various ways of being indirect by inviting conversational implicatures or by being vague or ambiguous. The former stems from “violations” (by which they actually mean their overt types: “floutings”) of the Gricean “Relevance” (or rather Relation, as proposed by Grice), Quantity and Quality maxims underlying efficient communication, while the latter originates from Manner Maxims’ violations. While the authors are correct in stating that maxims can be overtly violated because of the concerns about the face, their conceptualisation gives rise to misgivings. First of all, implicatures derive from floutings, synonymous with overt violations (vs. covert ones). Using the term “violation” without any epithet is ambivalent. Secondly, Manner maxims are also conducive to (politeness) implicatures. As a result, it is difficult to appreciate Brown and Levinson’s motivation in distinguishing them as a distinct category.

5 Communication of (im)politeness implicature

As already indicated in Section 4, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) approach presents an internal paradox. Whilst arguing in favour of a hierarchy of politeness strategies, they maintain that politeness is immanently rooted in implicature. Also they are adamant that politeness is accomplished by implication (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5, 22, 55, 95, 271), for instance:

Linguistic politeness is therefore implication in the classical way [...] politeness has to be communicated and the absence of communicated politeness may, ceteris paribus, be taken as absence of the polite attitude. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 5)

Politeness is implicated by the semantic structure of the whole utterance (not sentence), not communicated by ‘markers’ or ‘mitigators’ in a simple signaling fashion which can be quantified. (Brown and Levinson 1987: 22)
If politeness must arise by implication, no politeness can be associated with
the on-record strategy, which corresponds to fulfilling the Gricean maxims (Fraser
2005), or with any utterance based on what is said but representing any other
politeness strategy. One may solve this problem by conceding that what Brown
and Levinson (1987) mean is a higher level of implication. Irrespective of whether
an utterance as such is couched in implicitness, politeness is an implicated meta-
message, “I intend to be polite” (cf. Fraser 2005). To reformulate, whether or not
entailing maxim flouting (going off record), Brown and Levinson’s (1987) polite-
ness may be seen as a distinct level of meaning communicated beyond the central
meaning of an utterance. As Fraser (1990: 228) observes, Brown and Levinson
are adamant that “the failure to communicate the intention to be polite may be
taken, ceteris paribus, as absence of the required polite attitude” (cf. Brown and
Levinson 1987: 5, quoted above). A query arises, nonetheless, as to whether impo-
liteness is always a communicated message.

footsteps, presents a different conception of politeness implicature. He advov-
cates a view that politeness arises by virtue of implying something, in addition
to what is literally said and is necessarily co-constructed by the speaker and the
hearer. Implicature is an additional level of communication jointly materialised
by interlocutors. Haugh stresses that “while it is debatable whether politeness
itself can be considered an implicature, the existence of politeness implicatures
(an implicature which gives rise to politeness) is indisputable” (2007: 92). To illus-
trate this claim, Haugh (2007) provides an example of an apology issued by a
museum attendant towards a woman who is unwrapping her food and is about to
start eating on the premises. The apology alone generates the speaker-intended
implicature that she is not allowed to do this, which the addressee duly infers. A
question arises as to whether the attendant is cognisant of the fact that by apolo-
gising and implying a meaning which would otherwise be conveyed via a more
imposing (albeit possibly still polite) utterance, he is communicating politeness
as a message, and whether the woman does appreciate this. Unquestionably, the
apology functions as a conventional act inherent to etiquette (coinciding with
first order politeness) ingrained in the interlocutors’ minds, which in this case
carries the implicature, “You’re not allowed to eat here”. Politeness is more of a
backgrounded premise guiding the attendant’s construction of this implicature,

6 Fraser (1990, 2005) and Pfister (2010) view this type of implicature as the central one and
the only one that Brown and Levinson (1987) postulate regarding politeness. Here, however, a
different belief is espoused: politeness is a backgrounded assumption, and very rarely a meta-
message, while an utterance carries what is said or an implicature, even if related to politeness.
not a communicated message, not to mention an implicature arising from the utterance.

Whilst the researchers quoted so far treat implicature as an entity, admittedly exemplifying their claims with the *particularised* type (Grice 1989a [1975], 1989b [1978]), Terkourafi (2003, 2005a) concentrates on *generalised conversational implicature*, which she divides into two subtypes (meaning presumed with minimal context and in all contexts), as the source of politeness. This is because

“rather than engaging in full-blown inferencing about the speaker’s intention, the addressee draws on that previous experience (represented holistically as a frame) to derive the proposition that ‘in offering an expression x the speaker is being polite’ as a generalised implicature, the addressee may then come to hold the further belief that the speaker is polite” (Terkourafi 2005a: 251)

On the whole, the argument that, at least in some cases, the hearer may take an inferential shortcut and recognise the speaker’s polite utterance is by no means counterintuitive. However, conceptualising a polite message as generalised implicature is unfounded. Again, politeness seems to be the assumption, motivation or communicative goal, which does not need to be overtly recognised by the speaker or the hearer, while chosen meanings (including generalised implicatures) are communicated.

Overall, politeness can hardly be seen as inhering in implicature, hence constituting a consciously conveyed and received meta-message conceived as a special case of Grice’s implicature (Fraser 1990, 2005; Jary 1998; Pfister 2010⁷). It would be wrong to assume that polite intent is implied or consciously observed in all cases, inasmuch as politeness is frequently taken by default and acknowledged if violated (Kasper 1990; Fraser 1990, 2005; Kingwell 1993; Jary 1998; Terkourafi 2003). In other words, politeness “constitutes the unmarked way of speaking in a community, which accounts for use of polite forms passing unnoticed” (Terkourafi 2005b: 109). Plausible is Fraser’s (1990) *conversational contract*, according to which politeness is more of a backgrounded norm rational partici-

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⁷ Pfister (2010) provides argumentation in favour of “being polite” as perceived both by the speaker and by the hearer, which is not supported here, although most of his observations as such are by no means inapt. Averring that both politeness and impoliteness arise even when no corresponding implicatures are present, he addresses cases of communicative failures (the speaker’s wrong understanding of how politeness is communicated and the speaker’s unintended verbalisation which the hearer finds offensive). Such failures are exceptions (anomalies) which should not be regarded as being of central importance if an ideal intention-based model of communication is in focus (which is the case of the models addressed here). In this ideal model, tacitly adopted by most researchers, the speaker’s intention to be (im)polite is compatible with the actual performance and the hearer’s inference (but see Bousfield 2010).
pants accept by default within the negotiated constraints of a conversation. Thus, the speaker does not signal any intention to be polite. On the other hand, as Meier (1995) observes, sometimes politeness is the primary goal, rather than be merely “piggy-backed” to another communicative act. A case in point is fellow travelers’ striking up a conversation about the weather, with the topic as such being less important than the very act of breaking the silence in a train compartment. However, even then interactants do not need to (but may) consciously perceive one another as communicating and gleaning politeness-orientated messages. Such observations are primarily pertinent to first order politeness and should also be transposed onto the level of second order politeness.

Also, since etiquette underlies most interpersonal encounters, politeness seems to serve as the bedrock for all talk, unless impoliteness comes into play. Scholarly pursuit of politeness in all utterances would be a gross exaggeration and a superfluous theoretical complication. This may also explain why authors decide to reorient their research and focus on *facework* (e.g. Terkourafi 2005b) or *relational work* (e.g. Watts 2003; Locher and Watts 2005, 2008). Admittedly, in certain interactional contexts (e.g. a presentation of a theory) politeness may not come into play, being more a matter of unmarked *politic* behaviour (Watts 1989, 1992a, 1992b), alternatively called *appropriate* behaviour (e.g. Meier 1995, Locher 2004). It comprises a set of rules which remain latent but are observed only if transgressed, as indicated also by Fraser (1990) in his conversational contract account. Politeness, or politic behaviour, may then work only as a general presumption, a set of norms that will not be evaluated, unless violated (e.g. if a lecturer suddenly offends the audience, e.g. “You must be retarded if you can’t get this”).

The problem of impoliteness in relational work and as a communicated message is more vexing, since it hardly is a normatively prescribed communicative behaviour, although authors acknowledge phenomena such as *conventionalised aggression* (Harris 2001) or *sanctioned aggressive facework* (Watts 2003). Mills (2003, 2005) even contests the use of the term “impoliteness” in reference to prevalent verbal aggression in certain communities of practice (e.g. in the army) (cf. Culpeper 1996, 2005; Bousfield 2008a), insofar as it is more of a norm, rather than transgression of a norm. However, even if *sanctioned*, blatant aggression need not be, and usually is not, *neutralised* in context, which is why it should still be recognised as impoliteness (Culpeper 2005). This means that, in certain contexts and situations, impoliteness may be expected but is always salient, rather than being taken for granted. On the other hand, regarding the aspect of implicature, similar observations can be made as were made concerning politeness. It is highly unlikely that impoliteness should emerge as a speaker-intended implicated meta-message, even if the hearer may consciously judge the speaker’s
utterance offensive. The impolite speaker will have certain communicative goals on his mind (e.g. to criticise, to denigrate or to reprimand), but will hardly mean to have himself/herself or his/her utterance consciously considered impolite.

6 Politeness maxim

While proposing a set of conversational maxims captured by four categories, Grice (1989a [1975]) hesitantly suggests that there may be complementary maxims, notably the one pertinent to politeness.

There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims (aesthetic, social, or moral in character), such as ‘Be polite,’ that are also normally observed by participants in talk exchanges, and these may also generate nonconventional implicatures. The conversational maxims, however, and the conversational implicatures connected with them, are specially connected (I hope) with the particular purposes that talk (and so, talk exchange) is adapted to serve and is primarily employed to serve. (Grice 1989a [1975]: 28)

The thrust of the quotation above, one may infer, is that it is not Grice’s contention that a Politeness maxim should be put on the same footing as the conversational maxims subsumed under the four categories. Politeness is more of a social and moral rule, rather than a maxim of conversation. Therefore, linguistic politeness, which can manifest itself in a variety of ways, will correspond to the fulfilment and flouting of conversational maxims, just as any other intentional meanings serving various communicative purposes. Nevertheless, Grice also mentions that the “Be polite” maxim, albeit normally observed, can indeed engender nonconventional implicatures. Given Grice’s laconic remark, it is difficult to account for what such implicatures are like and how they come into being. It seems that they emerge from observing the maxim, rather than flouting it. Grice then seems not to allow for impoliteness, a prevalent communicative phenomenon which has only recently been given scholarly attention.

It is perhaps due to Grice’s marginal remark concerning politeness that several authors have propounded the notion of a politeness maxim, as an addition to the Gricean account (Burt 1999; Kallia 2004, 2007; Pfister 2010). This should not be mistaken for maxims of politeness advanced under a separate principle of politeness, which allegedly transcends the Gricean model (Lakoff 1973, 1977, 1989; Leech 1983, 2003, 2005).

Burt (1999) endorses a view that a single Politeness Maxim (PM) should be added to the Gricean ones, since politeness is also based on rationality, as are the Gricean maxims, and is by no means mutually exclusive with the CP. Rightly, she
asserts that politeness is rational and displays no clash between politeness and CP” (Burt 1999: 2). She also affirms that her politeness maxim will show features typical of other maxims. Hence, it may clash with other maxims, and the speaker may opt out of it or flout it.

Similarly, Kallia (2004, 2007) proposes that politeness arises in the same way as other conversational implicatures and that the Maxim of Politeness should supplement Grice’s maxims. Also, politeness subscribes to the Cooperative Principle by capturing the social dimension of rationality (see also Kingwell 1993). The maxim reads as follows:

Be appropriately polite (i.e. politic in Watts’ sense) in form (choice of how) and content (choice of what).
- Submaxim 1: Do not be more polite than expected.
- Submaxim 2: Do not be less polite than expected. (Kallia 2004: 161)

As is the case of the Gricean maxims, this one can be observed or flouted, thereby producing different implicatures (Kallia 2004). However, contrary to Grice’s maxims, Kallia’s maxim yields implicature even if observed. The implicature revolving around the observance of the Maxim of Politeness is a standard implicature, a weak, usually unnoticed, background message that the rules are being followed. When the maxim of politeness clashes with other conversational maxims or when the maxim of politeness is flouted either because of politeness (Submaxim 1) or rudeness (Submaxim 2), multifarious politeness implicatures can transpire, expressing the speaker’s positive or negative attitude towards the hearer, respectively. To illustrate this, Kallia provides an example cited from Kingwell’s (1993), in which the speaker changes the topic, thereby avoiding a critical response to a question about the interlocutor’s haircut. Rather than flout the maxim of politeness, on the neo-Gricean view, the speaker flouts the Relation maxim. It seems, therefore, more sensible to postulate that conversational maxim flouting may be motivated by politeness, instead of postulating a redundant maxim.

On the other hand, Pfister (2010) states that the maxim of politeness can generate implicatures, inasmuch as Grice’s conversational maxim is “violated” (by which he means overtly violated or flouted), owing to its clash with the maxim of politeness. It is then not so much the flouting of the politeness maxim per se as the flouting of conversational maxims that promotes implicature (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987). At the same time, Pfister (2010) argues that the maxim of politeness⁸ can be followed or “disregarded”/“violated”. Pfister (2010: 1277) empha-

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⁸ Pfister (2010) attributes this notion to Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), both of whom put forward principles of politeness vis-à-vis the CP. Thus, their maxims, subsumed under the Polite-
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... that the maxim can be easily “violated”.⁹ leading to impoliteness. Given the thrust of this claim, Pfister’s violation must mean overt violation, i.e. flouting, for an impoliteness act is typically recognised by the hearer. Such ambivalent terminology blurs the picture. Moreover, Pfister claims that because the maxim is pertinent to rational conversations necessarily held by potentially aggressive parties, it does not always apply in rational interactions, specifically when interlocutors are aggressive. On the other hand, he postulates: “Since the maxim of politeness is a maxim that underlies rational conversation, utterances in a rational conversation will in general be polite” (Pfister 2010: 1272). This line of reasoning seems to be based on circular logic and contradicts the idea of “violation” as a commonplace occurrence, which Pfister also champions. This convoluted reasoning cannot be accepted primarily because the speaker can be polite or impolite while being rational, and may overtly violate the Gricean maxims (thereby generating implicatures), with the alleged politeness maxim having no bearing on it. Another problem is that, in conformity with the perception of politeness as a continuum (Fraser and Nolen 1981: 97), Pfister is of the opinion that the maxim of politeness shows degrees, as do the Gricean maxims, but for the maxims of Quality. However, Grice’s theoretical model is contingent on the speaker’s intention to convey a particular meaning, while the maxims are either obeyed or flouted to yield implicatures, and they are not to be judged in terms of their gradability or idiosyncratic perceptions (for a different view, see Bousfield 2008a).

All of these proposals of politeness maxims display a number of problems (some already indicated), which point to the fact that a politeness maxim, however conceptualised, does not display the status or importance of the Gricean conversational maxims. The problem central to all the approaches is the maxim’s covert or overt nonfulfilment. A violation (a covert non-fulfilment) could, admittedly, be tantamount to the speaker’s deception coinciding with covert impoliteness to the hearer (e.g. materialised by a backhanded compliment). This could also be explained as Quality violation, with impoliteness as the motivation/undisclosed meta-message. On the other hand, a flouting of the politeness maxim would lead to overt impoliteness, not necessarily couched in implicitness. Additionally, treating the maxim as a norm which must be observed (which does not apply to the Gricean maxims), some might claim that impoliteness is an anomaly if politeness is treated as the norm (even if the notion of flouting denotes a legitimate action).

⁹ Pfister (2010) also adds that it is flouted more easily than the Gricean maxims, which gives rise to misgivings, thanks to the frequency of occurrence of implicatures and their key theoretical status.
Nevertheless, impoliteness is by no means an anomaly (Culpeper 1996, Culpeper et al. 2003), owing to its frequent occurrence in various discourses. This is then yet another argument in favour of not regarding politeness as a distinct phenomenon in the context of the Gricean framework (Bousfield 2008a). More importantly, impoliteness cannot be treated as a natural implicature based on politeness, given that it is a distinct communicative phenomenon, not a type implicature by nature. As already stressed, it is the flouting of Grice’s conversational maxims that engenders implicatures that may be motivated by politeness or impoliteness. However, politeness and impoliteness may also underlie literal meanings.

Overall, contrary to the Gricean maxims which promote implicatures, a politeness maxim does not seem to share this capacity. It is noteworthy that, while propounding the maxim of politeness, Pfister (2010) indicates that politeness is not a conversational maxim, but a matter of convention, which is in tune with Grice’s (1975 [1989a]) suggestion. Therefore, politeness should be kept separate as a convention or backgrounded norm, rather than being conceptualised as a maxim complementary to Grice’s. Additionally, forming a separate politeness maxim would raise a question as to whether impoliteness, and other conversational phenomena (e.g. humour, persuasion, or agreeing), should not be assigned their own maxims, leading to an otiose open-ended list, as already observed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Finally, a politeness maxim would be burdened with other problems, such as cross-cultural differences in its applicability (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Jiang 2003). There is then no need for an extension of the Gricean proposal of conversational maxims.

7 Conclusions

This paper aimed to explore a number of theoretical problems germane to (im)politeness research whose bedrock is Grice’s model of communication, which embraces the CP, together with the subordinate maxims, implicature, and speaker meaning. The aim was to corroborate a claim that some of the (im)politeness literature, its merits notwithstanding, is replete with methodological problems rooted in the authors’ misreading of the Gricean framework or its doubt-provoking extensions.

First of all, the prevailing models of politeness are grounded in a distorted view of the CP, thus assigning politeness to a deviation from “rational efficiency” or cooperation, understood according to the lay definition of the word, whether in terms of linguistic or social cooperation. In opposition to this, it was argued that all communication, whether orientated to politeness or impoliteness, is based on
the CP, which necessitates only interlocutors’ rationality (as well as intentional-
ity). Hence, the CP is superordinate to any other communicative principles, which
may be independently advocated. Whilst the CP is advanced as a tacit mutual
agreement, a communicative sine qua non, maxims need not be observed but
may be flouted, i.e. overtly violated (among other forms of non-fulfilment). Maxim
floutings, which generate implicatures, by no means contravene the CP, which
always holds by default. Therefore, contrary to what a few authors postulate, (im)
politeness and the Gricean framework are not mutually exclusive, which is why
a politeness principle is neither its necessary compliment nor its opposite. If this
were the case, another principle might have to be added to account for impolite-
ness. Nor is a politeness maxim an indispensable extension of the framework.
This is because it would not subscribe to the characteristics of the Gricean CP. Any
meanings associated with (im)politeness can be successfully explained with the
conversational maxims. Moreover, while some implicatures may be motivated by
(im)politeness, no basis can be found for the claim that (im)politeness is invari-
bly communicated as implicature. Politeness (together with politic behaviour)
is rarely consciously communicated or acknowledged by the hearer but is rather
assumed by default, with its violations being salient. Finally, there does not
appear to be any clear correspondence, let alone correlation, between (im)polite-
ness and implicitness. It is also literal meanings (the Gricean what is said) that
may convey polite meanings, depending inter alia on the nature of the relation-
ship between interlocutors; whereas implicitness may carry impoliteness. Nor
is it reasonable to state that (im)politeness must invariably reside in particular
means of expression, even if certain tendencies can be observed. Essentially, no
linguistic form can be labelled as being inherently polite or impolite but must be
assessed anew for each utterance produced in an interaction, with special atten-
tion being paid to the speaker’s intention, as well as the hearer’s interpretation.

To conclude, the Cooperative Principle obtains in rational and intentional
communication and encompasses all rationally and intentionally produced
meanings, inclusive of those motivated by, or orientated towards, politeness or
impoliteness. Communicated intentional meanings geared towards politeness or
impoliteness can be couched in what is said or implicatures consequent upon
conversational maxim floutings, legitimate as they are in the light of the CP.
Essentially, no tenets put forward in reference to (im)politeness can be at odds
with the Gricean logic of conversation.
References


