Introducing impoliteness

Orientating to impoliteness

Let us begin by working through two brief examples. I will use these as a springboard for the array of impoliteness phenomena to be examined later in the book (I will not cite much supportive research here, but will do so in later chapters).

The first example is taken from my report data. It is a kind of diary report, with some reflective commentary, written by a British undergraduate (details of the methodology are given below). (Note: I make no attempt to 'clean-up' the data analysed in this book, and so there will be spelling errors and other infelicities.)

[1]

> I was in a taxi with 5 other girls, on our way into town. The taxi driver seemed nice at first, commenting on how pretty we looked etc. Then he turned quite nasty, making vulgar sexual innuendos, swearing a lot and laughing at us. He then insulted some of us, commenting on the clothes we were wearing and when we didn't laugh, he looked quite angry. He then asked where we were from, we told him, and then he started criticising and insulting us and our home towns. We mostly stayed quiet, giving non-committal, single word answers until we could leave.

My informant commented that the taxi driver's behaviour was 'sexist, rude, very offensive and inappropriate given the context'. Clearly, impoliteness behaviours are labelled in particular ways; impoliteness has its own metadiscourse. The behaviour is described as 'rude', a term that encompasses the semantic domain of impoliteness. It is also described as 'sexist', a notion that partially overlaps with impoliteness (for an excellent account of language and sexism, see Mills 2008). Impoliteness often involves seeking to damage and/or damaging a person's identity or identities. This behaviour had the particular negative effect of being 'very offensive'. Later in her commentary, the informant adds that they felt 'angry, disgusted, and upset'. These are typical emotions triggered by language considered impolite. The informant observes that the behaviour was 'inappropriate given the context'. Most impoliteness behaviours are

1

inappropriate. This, of course, is a very broad observation; lots of things are
considered inappropriate, but do not amount to impoliteness. I will need to be
more specific in this book. In her commentary, the informant does in fact make
more specific points: '[i]t made us feel bad because we had been insulted when
we had done nothing to provoke it'. This reflects the fact that impoliteness as
retaliation for impoliteness is considered justifiable and appropriate, and thus
less impolite (Section 7.4 elaborates on this particular context). The report
also alludes to a dynamic aspect of context: 'the taxi driver seemed nice at
first . . . then he turned quite nasty'. Some research has suggested that negative
violations of conversational expectations are particularly bad, if they occur after
a positive beginning. Note also that the report is peppered with references to
specific kinds of communicative behaviour produced by the taxi driver: 'com-
menting' (twice), 'innuendos', 'swearing', 'laughing', 'insulted/insulting' and
'criticising'. In addition, the informant observes that 'he looked quite angry',
and in her commentary that 'his tone of voice and facial expressions also made
us feel very uncomfortable'. Clearly, behaviours such as these will need careful
examination.

It is not an unusual occurrence that people take offence at *how* someone says
something rather than at *what* was said. Consider this exchange between two
pre-teenage sisters:

[2]
      A: Do you know anything about yo-yos?
      B: That's mean.

On the face of it, speaker A's utterance is an innocent enquiry about speaker B's
state of knowledge. But speaker B provides evidence of her negative emotional
reaction in her response, a metapragmatic comment – 'That's mean.' The
impoliteness is referred to by the metalinguistic label 'mean'. Clearly then,
the communicative behaviour has evoked a negative attitude. One might infer
that her wish to have her competence in yo-yos upheld, her expectation that it
normally is upheld by others, and/or her belief that it should be upheld (in accord
with family 'rules') has been infringed. Emotions relating to her perception of
self, how her identity is seen by others and/or how her identity should be
treated are triggered. How are they triggered? Speaker A heavily stressed the
beginning of 'anything', and produced the remainder of the utterance with
sharply falling intonation. This prosody is marked against the norm for yes-
no questions, which usually have rising intonation (e.g. Quirk *et al.* 1985:
807). It signals to B that A's question is not straightforward or innocent.
It triggers the recovery of implications that A is not asking a question but
expressing both a belief that speaker B knows nothing about yo-yos and an
attitude towards that belief, namely, incredulity that this is the case – something
which itself implies that speaker B is deficient in some way. Without the

prosody, there is no clear evidence of the interpersonal orientation of speaker A, whether positive, negative or somewhere in between. Why exactly does B take offence? She takes offence at the communicative behaviour because: it infringes expectations/beliefs that are strongly held and emotionally sensitive; its pragmatic meaning required a considerable amount of inferential work to recover; there are no obvious mitigating factors in the context (though the prior co-text provides evidence that speaker A is frustrated with her); on the contrary, there are interpretative factors that are likely to intensify the offence, namely that speaker B is likely to infer that speaker A intended it to happen.

These two examples give a sense of the range of phenomena that need to be addressed in a treatment of impoliteness, such as particular behavioural triggers, the communication and understanding of implicit and explicit meanings, emotions, norms, identities, contexts and metadiscourse.

The field of study

Impoliteness is a multidisciplinary field of study. It can be approached from within social psychology (especially verbal aggression), sociology (especially verbal abuse), conflict studies (especially the resolution of verbal conflict), media studies (especially exploitative TV and entertainment), business studies (especially interactions in the workplace), history (especially social history), literary studies, to name but a few. This is not to say that all the researchers from these various disciplines will use the label impoliteness. As I will show in Chapter 3, certain researchers gravitate towards certain labels, labels which reflect their particular interests and approach. Here, I will briefly elaborate on impoliteness issues in three disciplines outside the realms of linguistic pragmatics, and then within linguistic pragmatics.

Work in social psychology on aggression or aggressive behaviour constitutes a large literature (for useful overviews, see Baron and Richardson 1994; Geen 2001). From the outset, with classics such as Buss (1961), verbal acts of aggression were considered alongside physical acts. This has implications for how aggression is defined. An interesting definition is provided by Baron and Richardson (1994: 7): '[a]ggression is any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment'. Note the use of the word 'harming'. Baron and Richardson (1994: 9–10) go on to say:

The notion that aggression involves either *harm* or injury to the victim implies that *physical* damage to the recipient is not essential. So long as this person has experienced some type of aversive consequence, aggression has occurred. Thus, in addition to direct, physical assaults, such actions as causing others to 'lose face' or experience public embarrassment, depriving them of needed objects, and even withholding love or affection can, under appropriate circumstances, be aggressive in nature.

4   Introducing impoliteness

In Tedeschi and Felson's (1994) work on aggression, the notion of 'social harm'
is central, and defined thus:

Social harm involves damage to the social identity of target persons and a lowering of
their power or status. Social harm may be imposed by insults, reproaches, sarcasm, and
various types of impolite behaviour. (1994: 171)

This is where the connection with impoliteness is clearest. It should be acknowl-
edged, however, that the bulk of work on aggression focuses on physical aggres-
sion (or does not distinguish verbal aggression in particular), and on aspects
that are fairly remote from notions such as social identity and power, such as
the acquisition of aggressive behaviours, broad determinants of aggression (e.g.
emotional frustration, the ambient temperature, alcohol), aggressive personality
dispositions and biological foundations.

   Research which is anchored in the field of sociology (or anthropology) has
focused on the social effects of verbal abuse. Many studies have considered
verbal abuse in relation to, for example, gender, race, adolescents, crime, school
bullying, marital breakdown, public employees and workplace harassment. As
briefly noted in the preface of this book, the finding of the sociologist and
criminologist Michele Burman and her colleagues (e.g. Batchelor *et al.* 2001;
Burman *et al.* 2002) is that teenage girls viewed non-physical or verbal
behaviours as potentially more hurtful and damaging than physical violence.
Their impressive study of perceptions of violence amongst teenage girls
deployed self-report questionnaires, focus group discussions and in-depth inter-
views. It shines light on the forms of violence, the contexts they take place in,
their purposes and functions, and their impact on recipients. Regarding forms
of violence, they state:

The most common 'violent' encounter reported by girls of all ages and from all back-
grounds and situations concerned their use and experience of (what we have called)
'verbal abuse'. Examples include threats (e.g. 'You're a lying cow and if you don't stop
it I'm gonna hit you'), name-calling and insults (e.g. calling someone a 'lezzie', a 'ned'
or a 'fat cow'), ridicule, and intimidation by shouting or swearing. Girls reported being
singled out for their so-called undesirable physical attributes (such as being overweight
or having red hair), their dress style (especially 'cheap', non-branded clothes) or sus-
pect personal hygiene. Skin colour and regional accents were also identified as signifiers
of difference and therefore ridicule, as were sexual reputation and sexual orientation.
Insults were not solely directed at girls themselves, however. Like Campbell (1986) and
Anderson (1997) we found that family members, particularly mothers, were also targets
for derogatory and critical remarks. (Batchelor *et al.* 2001: 128)

Although they do not use the terms impoliteness or impolite, this fits the under-
lying notion of impoliteness. In fact, we will see in Chapter 4 that devices such
as threats, name-calling and insults, ridicule and shouting are conventionalised
impolite ways of achieving offence. Also, especially in Chapter 1, which draws

upon a similar self-report methodology, we will see people taking offence when undesirable physical attributes, dress style, personal hygiene, regional accents and so on are flagged up by something that is said or done. However, these scholars do not investigate in any detail what verbal violence consists of or how it is said, or how different verbal expressions might interact with the co-text or context. It is also the case that this study is limited to one specific speech community.

Conflict studies is a wide-ranging multidisciplinary field, focusing in particular on conflicts of viewpoint, interest, goal, etc. and their resolution in relations of various sorts (e.g. amongst partners, family members, institutions, countries). There are two particular subfields that are relevant to my concerns. One is interpersonal conflict, focusing on relations between individuals. In this subfield '[c]onflict now refers to the general concept of any difference or incompatibility that exists between people' (Cahn 1997: 59); it is defined as 'interaction between parties expressing opposing interests' (Bell and Blakeney 1977: 850; see also Cahn 1997: 61). The other is conflict and discourse. Kakavá ([2001] 2003: 650) defines this as any 'type of verbal or non-verbal opposition ranging from disagreement to disputes, mostly in social interaction'. This subfield focuses on 'structural' patterns in conversational disputes, including such patterns as repetition, escalation and inversion (Brenneis and Lein 1977). I will discuss some of these patterns with respect to impoliteness in Chapters 6 and 7. If impoliteness involves using behaviours which attack or are perceived to attack positive identity values that people claim for themselves (cf. Goffman's 1967 notion of 'face') or norms about how people think people should be treated, as I will argue, then it involves 'incompatibility', 'expressing opposing interests, reviews, or opinions', 'verbal or non-verbal opposition' – it is intimately connected with conflict. However, there is little detailed work on language in social interactions being used for conflict. Moreover, we should remember that conflict is a broad category not solely restricted to cases involving positive identity values or social norms.

The main home for impoliteness studies is sociopragmatics, a branch of linguistic pragmatics and a field that blurs into several others, but most notably communication studies and interactional sociolinguistics. One reason why this is the best home for the study of impoliteness is that most work on politeness has been produced in this field, and so it seems natural that its apparent antithesis should be here too. A more substantial reason is that it fits the research agenda of sociopragmatics. Leech (2003: 104) states that politeness is situated in the field of sociopragmatics, because that research is geared towards 'explaining communicative behaviour'. Likewise, investigating impoliteness involves the study of particular communicative behaviours in social interaction. In the remainder of this section, I will overview the evolution of impoliteness in sociopragmatics.

6   Introducing impoliteness

One of the most enduring language-oriented lines of research feeding into the study of impoliteness must be the study – often philological in flavour – of swearing. The classic is Montagu's *Anatomy of Swearing* (2001 [1967]); and the most substantial work to-date is Hughes's mighty *An Encyclopaedia of Swearing* (2006). Moreover, perspectives on swearing have recently broadened to include both a sociolinguistic perspective (see McEnery 2006), and one that combines both social and cognitive issues (see Jay 2000). Nevertheless, whilst, unlike earlier studies such as Montagu's, these approaches focus on the use of swearing in context, it is obvious that there is more to being impolite than just swearing. Perhaps the first comprehensive and theoretically grounded paper on the topic is Lachenicht's (1980) 'Aggravating language: a study of abusive and insulting language'. Although there are problems with both the theory and methodology (see Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1553–4), it is weighty and innovative. Surprisingly, far from being a catalyst for further research, it almost disappeared without trace.

In the interim, research into 'politeness' gathered momentum. The classic politeness theories, Brown and Levinson (hereafter B&L) (1987 [1978]) and Leech (1983), focused on harmonious interactions, and thus, quite understandably, ignored impoliteness. Moreover, as elaborated by Eelen (2001: 98–100), they are generally not well equipped, conceptually or descriptively, to account for impoliteness. In particular, they tend to give the impression that impoliteness is either some kind of pragmatic failure, a consequence of not doing something, or merely anomalous behaviour, not worthy of consideration. The revival of discussions of impoliteness, within pragmatics at least, seems to have come about partly as a reaction to this impression, and this book will further demonstrate how untrue this is. Lakoff (1989), Kasper (1990), Beebe (1995) and Kienpointner (1997) argue and demonstrate that impoliteness can be strategic, systematic and sophisticated. Culpeper *et al.* (2003) point out that impoliteness and conflictive interactions, far from being anomalous behaviour, are commonplace in a variety of different discourses. Locher and Bousfield (2008) go so far as to argue that impoliteness is ubiquitous. Interestingly, studies that embrace the whole of Goffman's (e.g. 1967) notion of facework, rather than just the face-saving aspect (as do B&L 1987), have not experienced difficulty in accommodating impoliteness, or (at least) phenomena related to it. Although Goffman (1967) briefly mentions 'aggressive facework', it is Craig *et al.* (1986: 456–61) who seem to have been the first to discuss face-attack or face aggravation in relation to politeness theory. They point out the consequences for B&L (1987) of failing to treat face-attack strategies systematically, demonstrating that descriptive holes will be left in the analysis of data. Scholars developing accounts of face-attack include Austin (1987, 1990), Penman (1990) and Tracy and Tracy (1998). More recently, relational

approaches to politeness (e.g. Holmes and Schnurr 2005; Locher and Watts 2005; and Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005) − which focus on the analysis of inter-personal relations and facework − have relatively unproblematically accommodated impoliteness-related phenomena.

Culpeper (1996) was specifically designed to answer Craig *et al.*'s (1986) call for a comprehensive treatment of face-attack strategies. To an extent, the framework developed here is the face-attack 'flip-side' of B&L (1987). As this is also true of Lachenicht (1980) and Austin (1987, 1990), Culpeper (1996) is not the first B&L inspired impoliteness model, though it should be noted that all these models differ considerably in theoretical slant and in the detail. A common weakness, however, is the very fact that they draw on B&L, and thus any weaknesses of that politeness model are (at least in part) carried over. Culpeper *et al.* (2003) remedied some of those weaknesses, specifically examining how impoliteness can be both deployed and countered over sections of discourse longer than a single speech act (this is discussed in considerably more length in Bousfield 2007a and 2007b). Culpeper *et al.* (2003) also began to consider how prosody can be used to communicate or augment impoliteness (this is further dealt with in detail in Culpeper 2005). Furthermore, Culpeper (2005) explicitly abandons B&L's (1987) distinction between positive and negative face, and assesses interactions within context. Indeed, a feature of most recent publications on impoliteness is their focus on the role of context (see, for example, the papers in Bousfield and Locher 2008).

However, researchers taking the discursive or postmodern approach to impoliteness, for example, Mills (2003), Watts (2003, 2008) and Locher and Watts (2008), would argue that this does not go far enough. They emphasise that the very concept of impoliteness itself and its definition are subject to discursive struggle, and that we should be focusing squarely on the articulation of that struggle in discourse; in other words, on how the lay person's (or member's own) conception of impoliteness is revealed in their discourse, and not on how the lay person's discourse fits a conception devised by academics. In some respects, this position is consistent with the approach taken by Conversation Analysts (see Piirainen-Marsh 2005; Hutchby 2008, for a Conversation Analytic approach to impoliteness).

The year 2008 was important for impoliteness scholarship. In this year, the field saw the arrival of its first monograph, Bousfield (2008), its first volume of papers, Bousfield and Locher (2008), and first journal special issue devoted to impoliteness: 'Impoliteness: Eclecticism and Diaspora' (*Journal of Politeness Research* 4 (2), edited by Bousfield and Culpeper).[1] As Locher and Bousfield (2008) have noted, work on impoliteness in recent years is perhaps moving towards a middle ground between the classic and the discursive approaches. However, whilst there has been something of a rapprochement between the two

8   Introducing impoliteness

perspectives, there is still no agreement about some of the basics. One of the main aims of this book is to establish what those basics might be.

The data challenge

In order to avoid building a castle in the sky, it is essential that my work on impoliteness is grounded in data. This is not to say that my aim is simply to reveal the facts: there are no 'brute facts'; all facts are theory-laden, because they involve subjective interpretation, and this is especially true of social phenomena. Acquiring relevant data for impoliteness research is particularly difficult. Not all the traditional methodologies for collecting data for pragmatics research, particularly cross-cultural pragmatics research, are equally viable (for an overview, see Kasper 2008). Experimentally induced impoliteness is fraught with ethical problems. For example, older research (e.g. Brenneis and Lein 1977; Lein and Brenneis 1978) created situations in which participants might conflict with one another, but of course this would not be considered acceptable now. Role-play is also ruled out, partly because of ethical considerations, but also because it is difficult to imagine that participants could conduct such extreme behaviours in a natural way. This book is based on the following data sets:

- video recordings and written texts involving naturally occurring impoliteness;
- 100 informant reports containing a description of an impoliteness event, including what was said, contextual information, and the informant's reflections on that event (I also, at particular points in this book, deploy 400 other report forms, as I will explain below);
- corpus data; in particular, drawing on the two-billion word *Oxford English Corpus*; and
- an impoliteness perception questionnaire.

I will describe the first two datasets here, as they are used at various points throughout this book. The corpus data is heavily used in Chapter 3 and the impoliteness perception questionnaire forms a section at the end of Chapter 5, and so I will describe them in those chapters.

I have collected the following datasets (all already in the public domain) over the years:

1. *Tapped phone calls*. Available as part of courtroom transcripts in North America (e.g. www.courttv.com; some sound files are available), particularly those submitted as evidence because they are deemed threatening or abusive.
2. *Fly-on-the-wall documentaries*. Particularly, those relating to army recruit training. Approximately twenty hours from *Soldiers*, *Soldiers To Be*, *Soldier Girls* and *Red Caps*; approximately ten hours from programmes about traffic wardens (*Clampers* and *Car Wars*).

3. *Fly-on-the-wall pseudo-documentaries*. Fly-on-the-wall recording of con-
   trived situations designed to spark conflict: approximately ten hours from
   *Wife Swa*p and *Supernanny*.
4. *'Exploitative' TV shows*. Approximately twelve hours from *The Weakest
   Link* (a quiz show) and *Pop Idol* (a talent show).
5. *Graffiti dialogues*. Fifty-one graffiti dialogues collected from Lancaster Uni-
   versity library desks by Chris Hayes (a former student).

In addition, I have sundry examples culled from various contexts. These data
are largely drawn from UK-based cultures, and include a mix of genders,
social classes and ages. Some data is North American. The data predominantly
concern contexts where social conventions sustaining polite behaviours are
flouted by those in power in order to coerce (as for example in threatening phone
calls), where social conventions legitimise impolite behaviours (as for example
in army training or exploitative TV shows), or where misunderstandings about
what the social conventions are arise.

Whilst impoliteness plays a central role in a number of discourses such
as those mentioned above (see also Culpeper *et al.* 2003: 1545–6), naturally
occurring impoliteness is relatively rare in everyday contexts and thus difficult
to collect for analysis. For this reason, I decided to use the diary or field-
notes method. My inspiration here is Spencer-Oatey (2002), for which students
were asked to record 'rapport sensitive' incidents, that is, 'incidents involving
social interactions that they [the student informants] found to be particularly
noticeable in some way, in terms of their relationship with the other person(s)'
(2002: 533–4). Spencer-Oatey's analysis was based on 59 report forms. I col-
lected 100. In addition, I contacted colleagues in other countries, in order to
gather, using the same instrument, data from other cultural groups. Turkish data
was gathered by Leyla Marti (Boğaziçi University, Turkey), Chinese data by
Meilian Mei (Zhejiang University of Technology, China), Finnish data by
Minna Nevala (University of Helsinki; with help from Johanna Tanner from
the same institution) and German data by Gila Schauer (Lancaster University).
The total dataset, then, was 500 report forms. The full dataset will be deployed
in Chapters 2 and 3. Furthermore, I devised a report form that was more
detailed and focused than Spencer-Oatey's. In particular, unlike Spencer-Oatey
who focuses on events that have either a 'particularly positive effect' or a 'par-
ticularly negative effect', I sought to investigate only the latter. One aspect of
my design was to avoid mentioning a label that described the kind of behaviour
I am interested in – labels such as 'impolite', 'rude', 'abusive', 'aggressive' –
because the choice of a particular label may have biased my results towards
particular behaviours and, moreover, I wished to see what labels the informants
would choose. Thus, I asked informants to report conversations that had a par-
ticular *effect* on them – conversations 'in which someone said something to
you which made *you* feel bad (e.g. hurt, offended, embarrassed, humiliated,

10 Introducing impoliteness

Table 1 *The social profile of the report data*

		English	Chinese	Finish	German	Turkish
Age	*18–29*	98	100	99	99	100
	30–59	2	0	1	1	0
Gender	*Female*	79	67	89	73	64
	Male	21	33	11	27	36

threatened, put upon, obstructed, ostracised)'. A box extending a little less than half a page was provided for reports. In addition, and unlike Spencer-Oatey, I asked informants to reflect on their reported conversations in a number of specific ways:

- In order to gauge the gravity of the offence, I posed the question: 'How bad did the behaviour in the conversation make you feel at the time it occurred?' Responses were recorded on a 5-point Lickert scale.
- In order to gauge the degree of intentionality ascribed to the behaviour, I posed the question: 'Do you think that person *meant* to make you feel bad?' Responses were recorded on a 5-point Lickert scale.[2]
- In order to gain information about resultant emotions, I asked two questions: (1) 'We know you felt "bad", but describe your feelings?' and (2) 'Why did this particular behaviour make you feel bad?' Boxes allowing for a few lines of text were supplied for responses.
- In order to gain information about metalinguistic labels, I asked the question: 'How would you describe the behaviour of the person who made you feel bad (how would you label this kind of behaviour?)?' A box allowing for a few lines of text was supplied for responses.

I asked informants to supply information about their age and gender, and membership of each national dataset was determined by a question about the country the informant grew up in. Table 1 quantifies this information.

As can be seen, the profile of each national dataset is broadly similar. It should be noted that my results reported in this book from this report data are biased towards the perceptions not only of young students but also students who are female.

At no point were informants told that the research was related to anything to do with 'impoliteness'. Moreover, informants were not put under pressure to fill the form out on the spot. I thought that there would be no guarantee that at any particular moment an individual could remember a particular impoliteness event. A consequence of this is that huge numbers of report forms were administered, in order to achieve 100 complete forms, because students frequently forgot about the form altogether (and ignored reminders). In the case of the British data, well over 1,000 report forms were given out in order to achieve