Impoliteness

When is language considered 'impolite'? Is impolite language only used for anti-social purposes? Can impolite language be creative? What is the difference between 'impoliteness' and 'rudeness'? Grounded in naturally occurring language data and drawing on findings from linguistic pragmatics and social psychology, Jonathan Culpeper provides a fascinating account of how impolite behaviour works. He examines not only its forms and functions but also people's understandings of it in both public and private contexts. He reveals, for example, the emotional consequences of impoliteness, how it shapes and is shaped by contexts, and how it is sometimes institutionalised. This book offers penetrating insights into a hitherto neglected and poorly understood phenomenon. It will be welcomed by students and researchers in linguistics and social psychology in particular.

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Impoliteness

Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper

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I dedicate this book to my father,
who embodies everything this book is not about.

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Preface

Any research needs to justify its existence, because all research requires effort, time and money. Impoliteness is, in its modern incarnation, a new field of study, and any new field is prone to insecurity. More than this, impoliteness is up against prejudice. Embarrassed silence is a typical reaction when I declare what my research is, followed by a rapid change of topic. This is not quite the reaction one gets having declared one's research to be Shakespeare or the syntax of world languages. Impoliteness is assumed to be an unfortunate behavioural aberration, and, as far as language is concerned, it is the nasty scum on the margins. To be fair, this is not so often the reaction of people with more social interests. Impoliteness is, in fact, of great social importance. It is salient in the consciousness of the general public. In the guise of 'verbal abuse', 'threats', 'bullying' and so on, it is referred to and prohibited by public signs, charters, laws and documents relating to public places (especially in England); it is addressed by government (cf. Tony Blair's *Respect Agenda*); it is often reported in the media, particularly when it occurs in contexts where it seems 'abnormal' (e.g. verbal abuse directed at the elderly); and beamed into our living rooms usually as entertainment, as in the case of exploitative TV chat, quiz and talent shows (e.g. *Britain's Got Talent*). In fact, it is much more salient than politeness – in the UK, we almost never see signs urging positive verbal behaviour, such as 'Please use "please" to the staff' (though signs urging positive behaviours in general, such as 'Thank you for driving carefully', do sometimes appear). In private life, of course, we may well hear politeness rules being articulated and enforced, particularly in contexts such as parent–child discourse. And here we will also come across behaviours that break those politeness rules being condemned as impolite. Impoliteness has an intimate, though not straightforward, connection with politeness. Impoliteness is also of great interpersonal significance. Impoliteness is involved in aggression, abuse, bullying and harassment. Minimally, it results in emotional pain but can even end in suicide.

So, why do we need a linguist for this topic? Research suggests that the saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me' is not always true. The sociologist and criminologist Michele Burman and

her colleagues (e.g. Burman *et al.* 2002) found, for example, that teenage girls viewed non-physical or verbal behaviours as potentially more hurtful and damaging than physical violence. Greenwell and Dengerink (1973: 70), working in a very different psychological tradition of research on aggression, had arrived at a very similar conclusion: 'while attack is an important instigator of aggressive behaviour, it appears that the physical discomfort experienced by a person may be subordinate to the symbolic elements that are incorporated in that attack'. Symbolic violence is an important feature of much impolite language. One can get a sense of this by considering how words describing specific kinds of impoliteness have developed. For example, the word *insult* is derived from Latin *insulto*, which in the period of Classical Latin had two senses: (1) to leap or jump upon, and (2) to taunt, ridicule or insult. The original meaning of physical violence – jumping on one's victim – had developed a metaphorical symbolic violent meaning, and this is the one that survives today. However, neither sociologists nor psychologists investigate in any detail what those verbally impolite behaviours consist of or how they work. Enter the linguist! Indeed, there is much for the linguist to do. Verbal impoliteness is not simple (e.g. a mere reflex of anger). As I will demonstrate in this book, it can be elaborately creative. Moreover, the study of language and impoliteness is of value to the discipline of linguistics, despite the fact that it is rarely mentioned. Theories of linguistic interaction and communication developed in fields such as pragmatics, interactional sociolinguistics and communication studies are biased towards, and developed from, socially cooperative interactions. Consequently, they cannot adequately account for anti-social, impolite interactions. Yet, as I have noted, impoliteness is an important aspect of social life, and indeed plays a central role in many discourses (from military recruit training to exploitative TV shows), discourses which are rarely described in detail.

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