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978-0-521-86967-6 - Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper

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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.

JONATHAN CULPEPER is based in the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University.

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Jonathan Culpeper

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Preface</i>	xii
Introducing impoliteness	1
1 Understanding impoliteness I: Face and social norms	19
1.1 Introduction: Impoliteness definitions	19
1.2 The notion of impoliteness	22
1.3 Face and offence	24
1.4 Social norms and offence	31
1.5 Cross-cultural variation and offence type	43
1.6 Conclusion	47
2 Understanding impoliteness II: Intentionality and emotions	48
2.1 Introduction	48
2.2 Intentionality and offence	48
2.3 Emotion and offence	56
2.4 Understanding impoliteness: An integrated socio-cognitive model	65
2.5 Conclusion	69
3 Impoliteness metadiscourse	71
3.1 Introduction	71
3.2 Metalanguage/metadiscourse and impoliteness	73
3.3 The corpus-methodology and impoliteness metalanguage/metadiscourse	75
3.4 The frequencies of impoliteness metalinguistic labels: Academia and general usage compared	76
3.5 Impoliteness metalinguistic labels and their semantic domains	80
3.6 Metalinguistic labels and their domains of usage: Corpus and report data findings	82
3.7 Mapping impoliteness metalinguistic labels in conceptual space	97
3.8 Impoliteness metapragmatic comments and the case of ‘over-politeness’	100
3.9 Impoliteness metapragmatic rules	103
3.10 Conclusion	111
	vii

viii	Contents	
4	Conventionalised formulaic impoliteness and its intensification	113
4.1	Introduction	113
4.2	Face-attack strategies and context	114
4.3	Is (im)politeness inherent in language?	117
4.4	From conventionalised politeness to conventionalised impoliteness	126
4.5	Exacerbating the offensiveness of impoliteness formulae	139
4.6	Conclusion	152
5	Non-conventionalised impoliteness: Implicational impoliteness	155
5.1	Introduction	155
5.2	Implicational impoliteness: Form-driven	156
5.3	Implicational impoliteness: Convention-driven	165
5.4	Implicational impoliteness: Context-driven	180
5.5	Directness, context and gravity of offence	183
5.6	Conclusion	193
6	Impoliteness events: Co-texts and contexts	195
6.1	Introduction	195
6.2	The backdrop for impoliteness	197
6.3	Contextual priming: Face components, sensitivity and exposure	201
6.4	Co-textual priming: (Im)politeness thresholds and reciprocity	203
6.5	Recontextualising impoliteness: Genuine vs mock impoliteness	207
6.6	Contextual neutralisation of impoliteness	215
6.7	Conclusion	218
7	Impoliteness events: Functions	220
7.1	Introduction	220
7.2	Affective impoliteness	221
7.3	Coercive impoliteness	225
7.4	Entertaining impoliteness	233
7.5	Creativity and patterns of impoliteness	239
7.6	Institutional impoliteness	245
7.7	Conclusion	252
8	Conclusions	254
	<i>Notes</i>	259
	<i>References</i>	263
	<i>Index</i>	288

Figures and tables

Figures

1.1 Cross-cultural variation in the types of offence in impoliteness events	page 44
1.2 Cross-cultural variation in the primary types of offence in impoliteness events	45
2.1 Components and processes in the understanding of impoliteness	68
3.1 The twenty subject domains of the OEC (raw frequencies in millions of words)	76
3.2 A mapping of impoliteness metalinguistic labels in conceptual space	98
4.1 Instrumental analysis of ‘you leave with nothing’	146
5.1 Instrumental analysis of ‘eer’ on the left and ‘eeh’ on the right	162
5.2 An instrumental analysis of ‘the Australian army trained me’	164
5.3 An instrumental analysis of ‘is that why you go up in all your sentences’ and ‘yes’	165
5.4 Instrumental analysis of ‘you are the weakest link goodbye’	170
5.5 An instrumental analysis of ‘you don’t’	172
5.6 An instrumental analysis of ‘well what an interesting person you turned out to be’	173
5.7 Interactions between directness and gravity of offence in the expression of impoliteness	186
5.8 Degree of impoliteness: High to low vs Low to high power conditions	189
5.9 Degree of impoliteness and degree of directness (in both power conditions combined)	190
5.10 Degree of impoliteness and degree of directness in high to low power condition	191

x	List of figures and tables	
5.11	Degree of impoliteness and degree of directness in low to high power condition	191
6.1	The potential for face loss	203
6.2	Advertisement: 'EAT BEEF, YOU BASTARDS'	210

Tables

1	The social profile of the report data	10
2.1	The correlation of intentionality and gravity of offence	53
2.2	Emotions associated with offences involving Quality face	63
2.3	Emotions associated with offences involving Equity rights	64
2.4	Emotions associated with offences involving Association rights	65
3.1	Frequency and distribution of hits for IMPOLITENESS-related nominal expressions in the Social Sciences Citation Index and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index	77
3.2	Frequency and distribution of hits for IMPOLITENESS-related adjectival expressions in the Social Sciences Citation Index and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index	78
3.3	Frequency of IMPOLITENESS-related expressions in the <i>OECD</i>	79
3.4	Synonyms for <i>rude</i> , <i>impolite</i> , <i>aggressive</i> , <i>abusive</i> and <i>offensive</i> given in seven different thesauri	81
3.5	<i>Rude</i> and <i>impolite</i> : Words sharing the same corpus-based thesaurus category (top thirty in order of statistical significance)	83
3.6	<i>Rude</i> and <i>impolite</i> : Lexico-grammatical patterns in common	85
3.7	Lexico-grammatical patterns peculiar to <i>impolite</i>	85
3.8	Lexico-grammatical patterns peculiar to <i>rude</i>	86
3.9	The distribution of <i>rude</i> and <i>impolite</i> over text-type (up to the most frequent ten)	88
3.10	The distribution of <i>verbally aggressive</i> and <i>verbally abusive</i> over text-type (up to the most frequent ten)	89
3.11	The collocates of <i>impolite</i> and <i>rude</i> (the top-ten rank ordered according to MI score)	90
3.12	The collocates of <i>verbally aggressive</i> and <i>verbally abusive</i> (the top-ten rank ordered according to MI score)	91
3.13	Metalinguistic labels provided for 100 reported impoliteness events	94
4.1	Words and offensiveness in Britain in the year 2000	143
5.1	Pragmatic explicitness: Syntactic and prosodic directness	187

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-86967-6 - Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence
Jonathan Culpeper
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of figures and tables	xi
7.1 The frequencies of variants of the formula ‘You bastard’ in the <i>OEC</i>	239
7.2 Examples of ‘standard’ and ‘exploitative’ chat and quiz shows	249
7.3 The nature of ‘chat’ in three quiz shows	250
8.1 Conventionalised impoliteness strategies and formulae discussed in this book	256

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86967-6 - Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86967-6 - Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

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.

The writing of this book was made possible by a three-year Research Fellowship awarded to me by the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (RES-063–27–0015). Without this, it probably never would have happened. Along the way, I have accumulated a significant overdraft of favours. I would like to extend particular thanks to Leyla Marti (Boğaziçi University, Turkey), Meilian Mei (Zhejiang University of Technology, China), Minna Nevala (University of Helsinki) and Gila Schauer (Lancaster University) for letting me draw on some of their diary-report data for some sections of Chapter 2. Similarly, I have benefitted from the generosity of John Dixon (Lancaster University), for not only allowing me to report our pilot study in Section 5.5 but for undertaking it with me in the first place. I thank the many people who helped procure impoliteness diary-reports, including: Pu Bei (Zhejiang University of Technology); Martin Pütz (Universität Koblenz-Landau); Beatrix Busse (Universität Bern); Roland Kehrein (Philipps Universität Marburg); Tanja Giessler (Philipps Universität Marburg); Hans-Jörg Schmid

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978-0-521-86967-6 - Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Preface

(Ludwig-Maximilians Universität München); Anke Lüdeling (Humboldt Universität zu Berlin); John Dixon, Andrew Wilson, Eivind Torgersen, Sebastian Hoffman, Kevin Watson, Veronika Koller, Pelham Gore (Lancaster University); Sara Mills (Sheffield Hallam University); Andrew Merrison (York St John University); and Amy Wang (Manchester Metropolitan University). I am very grateful to: Brian Walker, who saved me from the tedium of transcribing all the British data, and ran some data searches for me; Jane Demmen, who helped procure some of the literature I needed; and Claire Hardaker, who, with remarkable efficiency, helped lick the bibliography of this book into shape. Special gratitude is reserved for John Heywood who read the entire manuscript, saving me from many a howler and infelicity, and prepared the index. More generally, I am indebted to the very many people who have helped shape my thinking over the years, including the members of the Linguistic Politeness Research Group (LPRG). Finally, I owe apologies more than thanks to Elena, Emily and Natalie who have borne the brunt of a stressed-out family member.

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