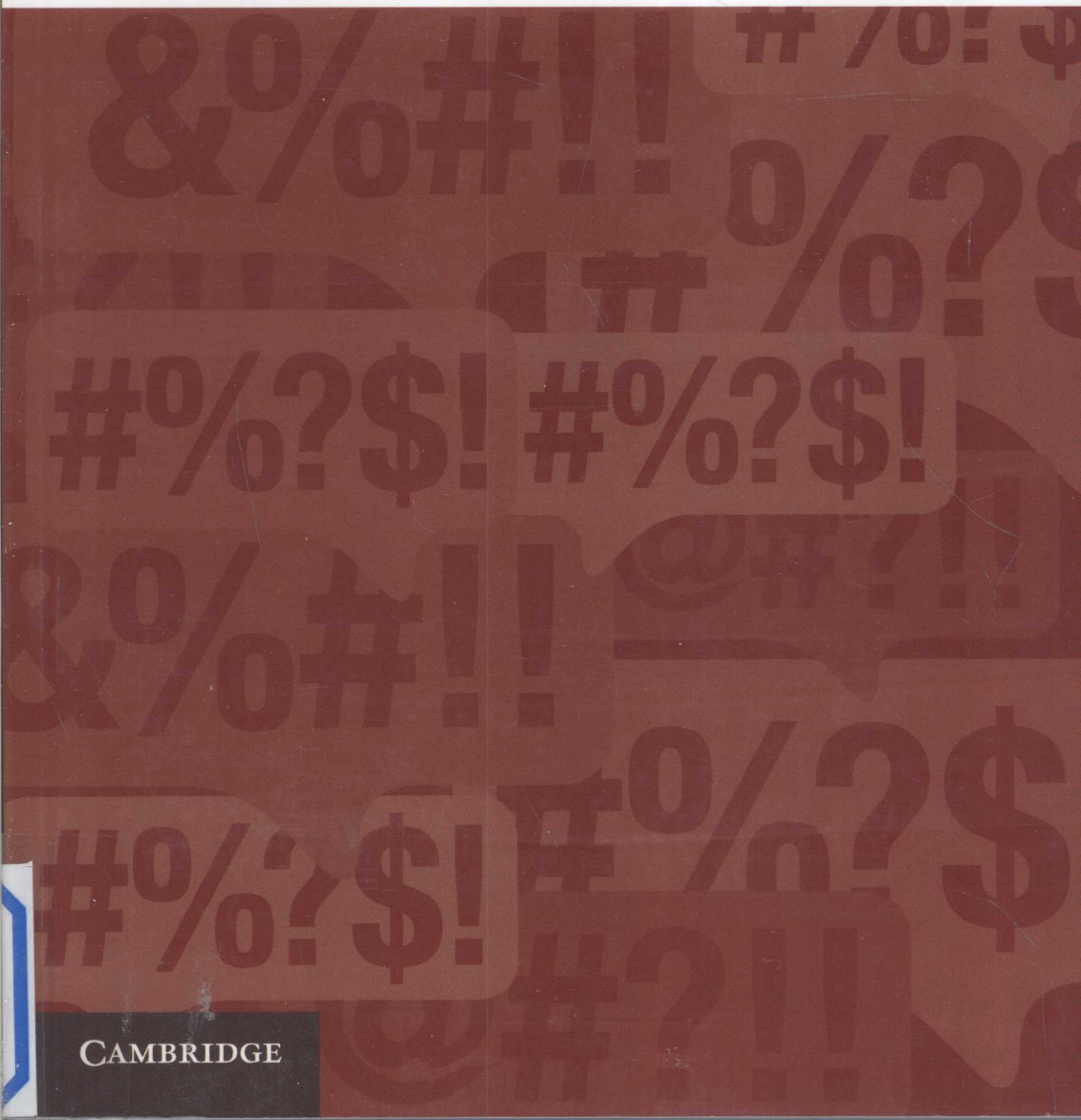
STUDIES IN INTERACTIONAL SOCIOLINGUISTICS 28

Impoliteness

Using Language to Cause Offence

Jonathan Culpeper



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Using Language to Cause Offence

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

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

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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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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

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: 'commenting' (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.

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 acknowledged, however, that the bulk of work on aggression focuses on physical aggression (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 interviews. 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 backgrounds 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 suspect 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 underlying 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.

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