

# The Grand Debate: Where Next for Politeness Research?

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**ABSTRACT:** Bousfield suggests the need to focus on the negative term in the binary opposition im/politeness, that is impoliteness, though acknowledging that it has a distinctive nature which requires that it be approached in its own terms. In this light, the study of positive / negative face in relation to im/politeness must be reoriented to give appropriate weight to contextual factors such as the psychology of im/politeness, the generation of contextualised implicatures and the context of discursive production.

*Keywords:* politeness, impoliteness, positive/negative face, context, conversational analysis, implicature discourse.

**RESUMEN:** Bousfield sugiere la necesidad de centrarse en el término negativo de la oposición binaria cortesía / descortesía, es decir, la descortesía, aunque considera necesario reconocer que no se trata de dos facetas de un mismo fenómeno, pues ambas se manifiestan en contextos no equiparables. Igualmente, el estudio de la imagen positiva / negativa en este ámbito debe reorientarse para destacar adecuadamente la importancia de los factores contextuales: de producción del discurso, de la psicología de la cortesía / descortesía o de la generación de implicaturas.

*Palabras clave:* cortesía, descortesía, imagen positiva/negativa, contexto, análisis conversacional, implicatura, discurso.

## 1. The Future of Politeness Research: Bias and Balance

As long ago as 1999 Fraser noted that since the publication of Lakoff's seminal paper in 1973, well over 1,000 books and articles had been published on the phenomena of politeness. Since that time the number has continued to grow apace. Despite such an exponentially rising mass of prolific research adding to

our critical understanding of the concept of politeness, as this very collection of papers in the Journal, *Culture, Language and Representation* suggests, much remains to be done. Indeed, Fraser (1990: 219) points out that there is little common understanding of the concept of politeness, «[...] and how to account for it is certainly problematic» (see also Xie, 2003: 811; Watts, 2003: xi). This problem, of accounting for politeness is, perhaps, hardly surprising given the «nearly geometric» (Xie, 2003: 811) or «mammoth-like» (Chen, 2001: 87) increase in the number of texts dealing with, critiquing, «correcting» or commenting upon politeness since Lakoff (1973). Indeed, it almost seems as if the mass of research undertaken works to confuse the issue further given that no one researcher could hope to critically assess every single paper and book-length publication that exists on the phenomenon. Rather, it would seem, to this researcher at least, that it is readily apparent that the otherwise disparate research efforts being made on the concept of politeness need to be brought together so as to avoid research on the subject simply «treading water» (Watts, 2002), that is, to avoid the overly simplistic re-invention of the same or similar (a) explanations for the same sorts of data but by (b) using different-but-equal methodological tools of enquiry and/or (c) different-but-equal ideologies of the phenomenon. This «gathering» of researchers can be achieved either informally, in themed, special editions of publications such as this, or formally, within constituted and formalised research groups and within specialised centres of enquiry. Together, such researchers can collaborate on furthering our understanding of Politeness both in terms of its applicability to new and unforeseen horizons, and to refinements in detail in terms of its use in actual language communication whilst drawing, collaboratively, from a greater range of the published work than a lone individual could hope to do alone. With this in mind I suggest, below, some areas in critical need of further, future and sustained research by such theorised collective bodies of researchers investigating Politeness.

## **2. Bias and Balance in Politeness Research**

One thing we must recognise is that amongst the wealth of published work, the existing approaches to politeness are, in Eelen's (1999, 2001) words, conceptually biased. Craig, Tracy and Spisak (1986), Eelen (1999, 2001), Fraser (1990, 1999), Kasper (1990) and Tracy (1990), amongst others, argue that to provide an adequate account of the dynamics of interpersonal communication approaches to politeness should also consider hostile (e.g. impolite) as well as cooperative communication, and that such hostile behaviour should be considered complementary to politeness (Kasper, 1990). Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann (2003) following Eelen (1999, 2001) note that while all the leading

politeness theories at least mention the notion of impoliteness, the problem is that *in practice* they all focus solidly on politeness, with the result that their comments on impoliteness are descriptively inadequate and often conceptually biased (i.e. it is assumed that the concepts used to explain politeness can straightforwardly be applied to impoliteness - see Eelen (1999: chapter 1) and Eelen (2001: chapter 3), for an elaboration of this point). In short, current approaches to politeness have been unable to fully account for the confrontational interaction in impolite discourses. A relative fraction of the number of work that has been published on politeness has been published on impoliteness. This is clearly an area for future research on politeness. With this in mind, we need to be careful not to simply re-invent, in the guise of impoliteness, everything that has been covered in research work on politeness, not leastwise because, as Mills (2005: 270) argues, politeness and impoliteness are not to be viewed as dichotomous polar opposites in the contexts in which they can and do occur. Further, how best to approach the concept of politeness needs further refinement and an understanding or accommodation on how this might be best achieved needs to be reached on a whole swathe of factors. Chief amongst them – the concept of face.

### **3. Politeness and Face. The Positive/Negative Dichotomy**

Whilst the Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) dichotomy of positive and negative face remains a rather useful shorthand for explanation and understanding of the concept of face-management, and despite a spirited defence by O'Driscoll (1996), maintaining a firm and discrete distinction between the two types of face may no longer be sustainable in the light of recent and growing research. Culpeper (2005) in the development of his model of impoliteness abandons the Brown and Levinson (1987) dichotomy on face in favour of Spencer-Oatey's (2002) categories. Watts (2003), Locher (2004) and Locher and Watts (2005) reject the pre-eminence of face by claiming that it is, in fact, «relational work» and not «face theory» that lies at the heart of politeness (understood as a discursive concept). Indeed, in reversing the tacitly held view (of Brown and Levinson, 1987) that face is a component part of Politeness, Locher and Watts (2005: 9) argue that politeness is «[...] a much smaller part of facework than was assumed until the present» and that politeness must be seen in relation to other types of interpersonal meaning affected by interactants' face-attendance and face-manipulation (Locher and Watts, 2005: 10). In essence, Locher and Watts (2005: 10) insist that Brown and Levinson's theory of Politeness is, in fact, a theory of *Facework*, not of Politeness as it deals only with the mitigation of face-threatening acts. Clearly a much larger, somewhat exhaustive debate which may lead us to a consensus is needed upon this issue.

What does seem apparent in the work of leading researchers in the field of im/politeness is that the concept of face is here to stay, but in what form, remains a consideration for us all. Indeed, the positive/negative distinction inherent in Brown and Levinson's (1987) work does not seem to stand up to close scrutiny. Let's take the following as an example. When a student comes into my office outside of my office hours and says, «*Derek, I'm really sorry to bother you but I need a little help and advice and I don't know who else could help.*» then, in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms, the imposition on my freedom of action (my negative face) is mitigated (or at least attempted to be mitigated) by the expression of an apology (...I'm really sorry to bother you...), the fact that the student has limited choice (...I need...), used a minimiser for what might actually be a major task (...a little...), etc. However, beyond the use of my first name (Derek,...) as an indicator of social closeness and, thus, an attempt at showing solidarity (hence, using «Derek» rather than «Dr. Bousfield» is an invocation of my positive face), what's not considered in Brown and Levinson's (1987) ostensibly form-based approach is that simply by coming to me and *asking for my help*, and not approaching or asking one of my colleagues, the student is enhancing my positive face (the want to be approved of by others) by assuming that I might have the (best placed) knowledge/ability/wherewithal to help them in their dilemma. As this suggests, part of the issue over the positive/negative face dichotomy is that whilst there are conventionalised phrases that, all other things being equal, indicate im/polite expressions, im/politeness does not and cannot reside in words or grammatical structures irrespective of the context in which it occurs.

Furthermore, just as the alternate «sides» to face can be attended to politely (through mitigation and enhancement) within a single utterance-in-context, so too can two apparently different aspects of face be attended to also. For example, Thomas (1995: 176) notes the following:

**Woman addressing importunate man.**

*Do me a favour – piss off!*

We should note the politeness work in the first part of the utterance (...Do me a favour...) – putting one's indebtedness on record is face-enhancing for your interlocutor as it (primarily) reduces the impingement upon the intended recipient's negative face by suggesting that effort expended by the hearer for the speaker will be reciprocated in a like-for-like manner at some point in the future. However, the latter part (... - piss off!) is a conventionalised impolite utterance in British English which is a combined attack (cf. Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann, 2003) upon both the intended recipient's positive face by (amongst

other things) the use of taboo language (cf. Culpeper, 1996) and the recipient's negative face by attempting to exclude them from the current *in loco* activities by insisting that they leave (cf. Culpeper, 1996), which together suggest that the recipient is not wanted and does not belong (a Positive face attack). So, simultaneously we appear to have, here, Politeness work attending to the recipient's negative face want to be unimpeded (though it does appear to be rather insincerely expressed), whilst we also have Impoliteness constituting a positive and negative face attack. At best, the positive / negative face dichotomy should now be considered as constituting «points of reference» for aspects of face, do not as discrete and divisible elements of face that don't interact. Essentially, more work on interactants' face-in-context is needed and, in my view, is needed sooner rather than later.

#### **4. Putting Im/Politeness in Context: From Micro to Macro**

As such, it behoves us to consider im/politeness in context. Context, after all, is all important. Herein lies another issue. Generalising wildly, the integrationalists would have us believe that as everything has a bearing on context, considering context from a research perspective is virtually impossible. Indeed, Conversation Analysts are often cited (perhaps unfairly) as Sociolinguists who refuse to consider what a speaker might have meant by what that speaker said, as to do otherwise suggests an ability to «get into people's heads» – to, in short, attribute intention. But, and here's the rub, we do this every time someone opens their mouth to speak to us: we expend cognitive effort on what they say, in relation to (intra-) cultural practices of communication within specific settings and we subconsciously ask ourselves to answer the question «What do they *mean* by what they *say* in the current context?» As such, research into the psychology of im/politeness (cf. Holtgraves, 2005), and into contextualised approaches to implicature generation as used within/applied to real-life interaction will all help to inform work on im/politeness (cf. Mooney, 2004).

With this in mind, research must therefore seek to consider im/politeness in the context in which it is produced, as it is felt (see Penman, 1990) that too many theories (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987 [1978]; Lachenicht, 1980; and Leech, 1983) consider im/politeness within the context of a single turn at talk. Such approaches, whilst valuable and necessary milestones on the research road to discovery, are simply that – research milestones. They do not adequately describe, nor predict, how (im)politeness may be used by speakers in extended, real-life interactions. I feel that investigating the phenomena of im/politeness in the fuller context of extended discourse as it is understood, schematically, by the participants (cf. Terkourafi, 2005) has significant contributions to make. These

contributions are made to both existing academic research in a refinement of our understanding of the phenomenon and to the application of politeness theories «real world» interactions between interlocutors across a whole range of situations.

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